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EVERY STORY IN THIS ISSUE BRAND NEW

TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 65, No. 3 FEBRUARY, 1957

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These Border smugglers had killed, the Lone Wolf knew, and certainly they would kill again without hesitation

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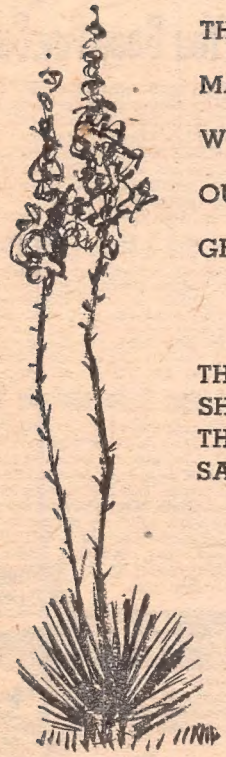
JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

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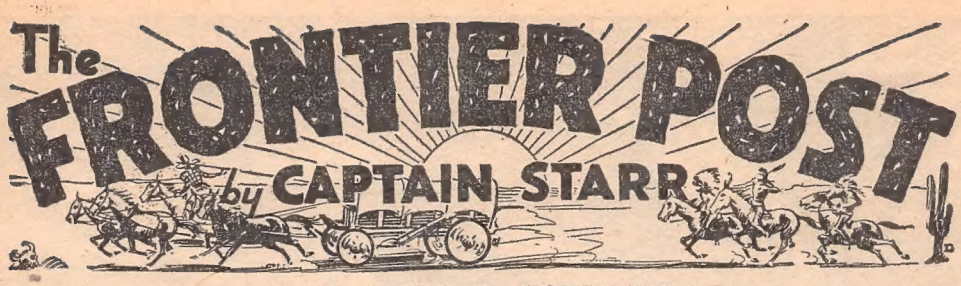

THE CONVICT COWHANDS

THE rodeo rider on the bucking bronco was known to be a murderer four times over and yet, though there were many officers around the arena, no one did anything about it. When the rider finally dismounted and walked off, they just let him.

The reason the officers didn't do anything about this murderer is that they didn't have to. The rider was already behind prison walls—for that's where the rodeo was being held!

The annual rodeo at Texas State Penitentiary is one of the wildest and wooliest of 'em all, with outlaw men riding wild outlaw horses. And few rodeos anywhere are better attended, with some 150,000 persons dropping in to witness the yearly event. It has become such a popular attraction that several of these shows have to be given in order for everyone to get to see them and, even so, people have to make reservations far in advance if they want to make sure of getting seats for the spectacle.

The rodeo was not instituted, however, as entertainment for the public. It was done as a means of rehabilitating the prisoners, of giving them something they could look forward to, a project which they could proudly participate in. And from its inception a number of years ago it has been a whopping success, both ways.

All the performers are prisoners. Some, like Francis Hoffman, Brooklyn born, never saw a cow up close before entering penitentiary walls. But he developed such skill in riding and roping that he won two first prizes in what was not only the first rodeo he ever rode in but the very first such contest he ever saw!

Some of these prison rodeo performers have received offers from outside rodeo circuits when they become free men again. The prizes that the prison puts up for the various rodeo events can't match those of outside rodeos, yet one of the prisoners has managed to save up $5000 as the result of the rodeo performances he has won through the years.

One man, a lifer, gave the rodeo money he'd earned to a buddy who was being released. "What the hell," he said, with a shrug, "it won't do me any good in here, and it will help give this other guy a start on the outside."

In most rodeos there are a few trained show animals who act pretty wild but really aren't. This is one rodeo, though, where the horses and the bulls are just as wild as they seem to be. And with the contestants facing years of prison—a lifetime, in some instances —they are apt to be more daring and reckless than regular rodeo performers who must keep from getting banged up in order to keep paying the bills.

The "prison punchers" are at their poorest when it comes to rope finesse. The reason is that the prison authorities don't give them too much of a chance to practice with rope, since it is a skill that can be used too readily to escape.

There's one event held at this Huntsville, Texas, penitentiary, that you don't often see anywhere else. It's a milking contest, with a wild mare the victim of this particular melodrammer. It's often hard enough for a colt to get milk from his wild mamma mare, but the convict cowhand who wins this event must rope the wild mare, milk out half a pint of "evidence" and dash to the judges before his opponents get there!

Nice going, Huntsville.

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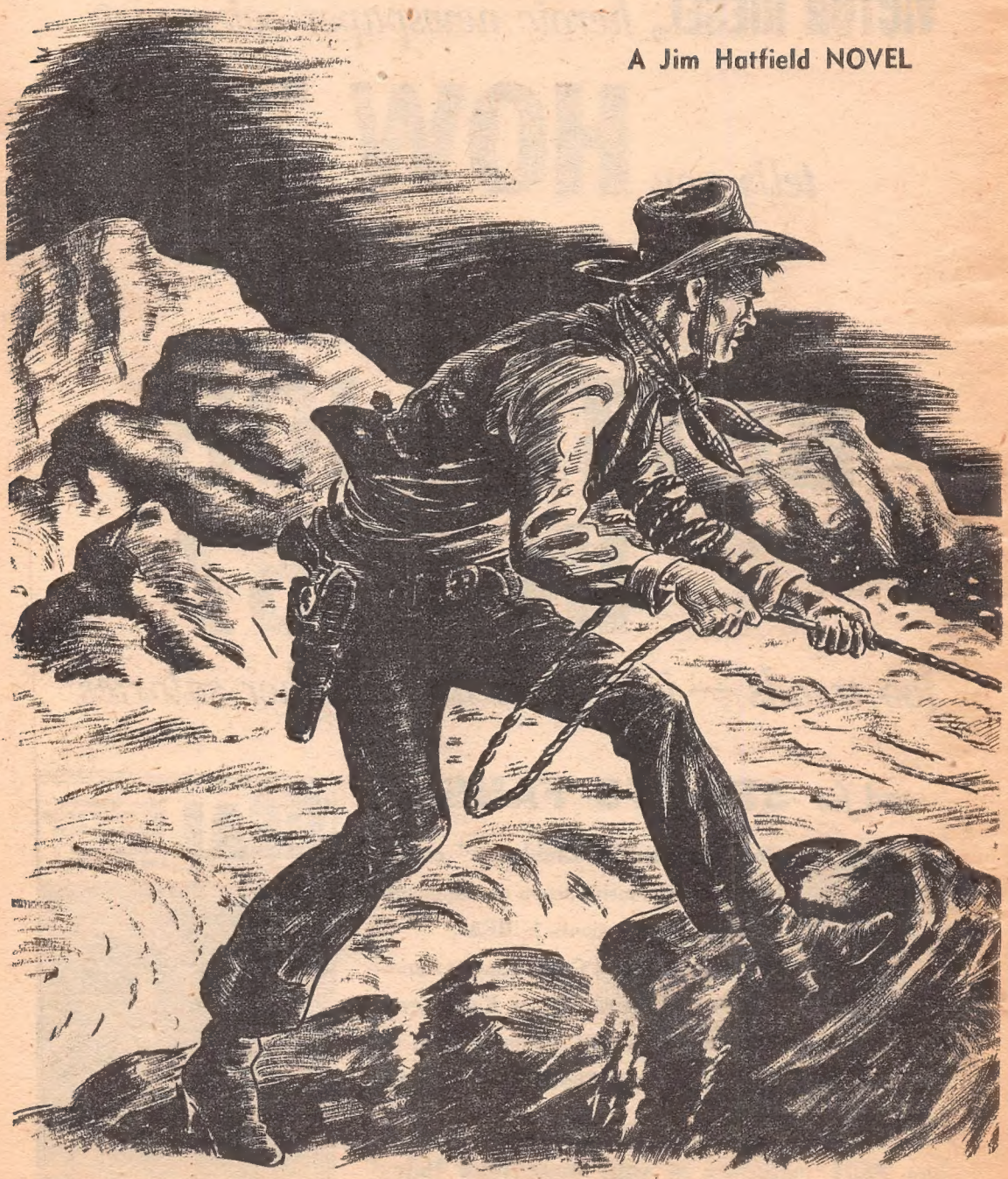
The

By JACKSON COLE

A Jim Hatfield NOVEL



Ambush Arrow

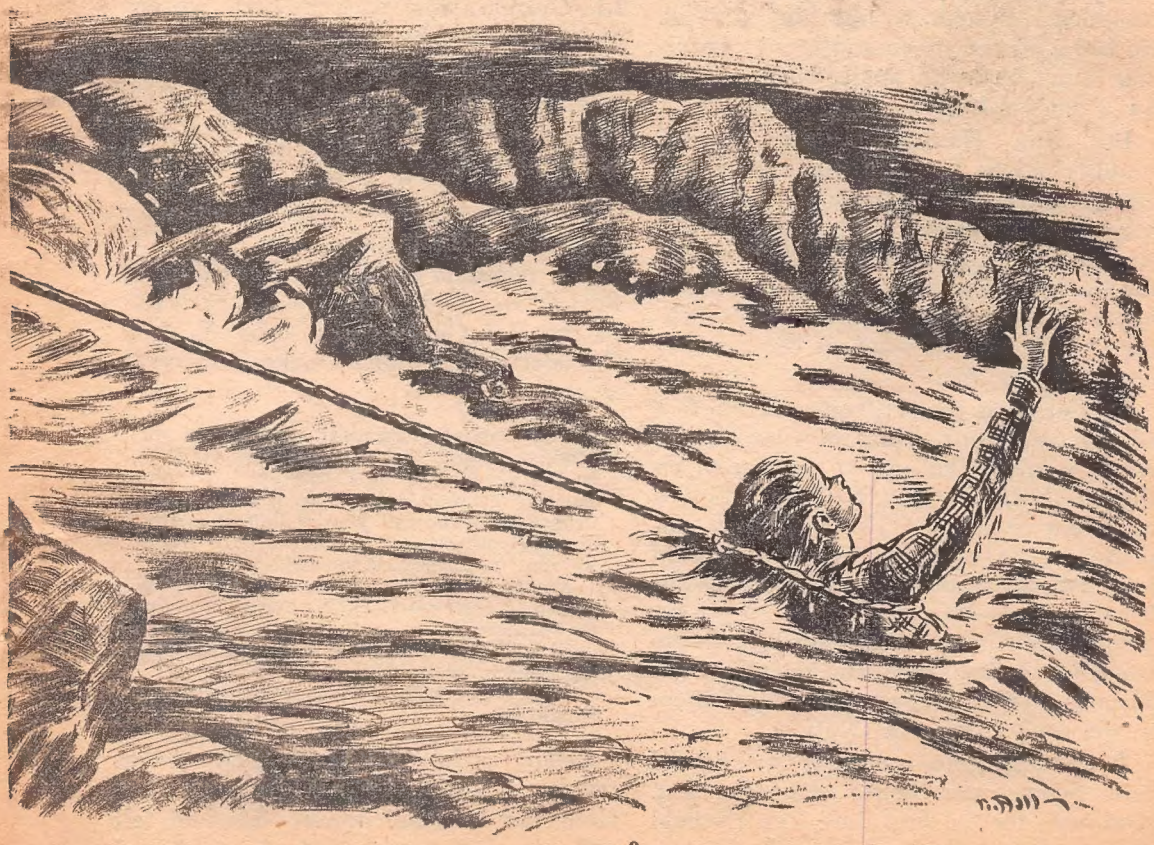
Life was cheap to these Border smugglers—they had killed, the Lone Wolf knew, and would not hesitate to kill again

CHAPTER 1

Bushwhack Trap

WITH his secret rendezvous in Escalera only hours away, Texas Ranger Jim Hatfield had to admit he was lost. The heavy junco thickets arched over the game trail he was following, closed out his view of the Texas sky as well as nearby landmarks. It was like being in a mine tunnel, with all sense of direction gone.

He reined up Goldy, his sorrel, to keen a silence as profound as only a silence in the Big Bend thicket country can be. Not a breath of wind stirred the jungle-thick foliage. Although he knew these ancient trails had been made by wildlife heading for the nearest river, he heard



nothing to indicate that he was approaching the biggest river of them all—the Rio Grande.

The lean, saddle-weary lawman reached to a shirt pocket for the makings of a cigarette, but his hand fell away to rest on the butt of the six-gun holstered at his flank. To light a smoke in these tinder-dry wastelands would be flirting with fiery suicide.

He murmured to himself, "When a man doesn't know East from West, I'd say he was lost."

Being lost, in itself, was no matter of grave concern for Jim Hatfield's personal safety. The Big Bend country of West Texas was big country, big enough to swallow up a New England state or two, but if a man kept riding he'd work his way out of the chaparral jungle eventually.

Hatfield's saddlebags carried emergency rations, jerky and dried peaches and pemmican, enough to last him a week. He had a filled canteen and canvas waterbag, slung from the saddle horn, enough for a day's riding.

But Jim Hatfield, Texas Ranger, couldn't afford to waste time retracing wrong trails. The telegraphic orders in his pocket, from Ranger headquarters in Austin, had emphasized that time was of the essence. The success or failure of an important mission depended on his reaching the Rio Grande town of Escalera not later than tonight.

Escalera was the settlement at the foot of the dangerous string of river rapids which marked the end of navigation on the Rio Grande, nearly five hundred miles upstream from the Gulf. Yesterday, approaching from the north, Jim Hatfield had had his choice of following established roads—or taking a short-cut through the brush, following tunnel-like trails which had been ancient when the Spanish explorers first discovered them in the early Sixteenth Century.

It was a gamble—saving a day's travel time, against the chance of getting lost. And now, for the first time, Jim Hatfield was ready to admit to himself that he had lost the gamble. By his calculations, this *brasada* trail should have brought him to the Rio Grande's gorge hours ago. Now, for all he knew, he might be headed in the opposite direction. The sun was obscured behind a midsummer thunderhead, and he had neglected to bring along a compass, so hastily had he hit the trail after receiving Captain McDowell's cryptic telegram at Fort Davis two days back.

Hatfield dismounted, loosening the cinch for Goldy's comfort during this brief stop. Out of saddle, the Ranger seemed to take on stature; he stood over six feet without benefit of the spike-heeled Coffeyville boots or flat-crowned stetson, and the brush-scuffed bullhide chaps accentuated the saddle warp of his legs.

"Nothing I can do but reconnoiter for some landmark, Goldy," Hatfield murmured, as the big stallion nuzzled his cheek affectionately. "If I can see the Rio Grande's canyon from here, we can make Escalera by sundown yet."

It was frustrating, not knowing what was awaiting him in Escalera; but that was the way Roaring Bill McDowell handled assignments when his men were out in the field. He just gave enough information to intrigue a man, or put a cold tingling suspense in his belly.

The telegram Hatfield had received in Fort Davis, sending him on this rush ride to the Rio Grande, had been in code. Translated, it didn't make too much sense:

> Drop present assignment immediately and proceed without delay to town of Escalera on the Rio Grande, reporting not later than Tuesday evening July 14 to Inspector Bob Chestwick of the U.S. Border Patrol. Do not identify yourself to any other federal official for reasons Chestwick can explain.
>
> Working with you on case will be Selwin Ogden who leaves early Wednesday for extended absence in Europe. Inspector Chestwick will fill in details, which is one of those big "million dollar" deals.
>
> Suggest you make sure your life insurance is paid up.

Seeing as how the Border Patrol was involved—Bob Chestwick was a big name along the Mexican border—Hatfield felt safe in assuming that international

smuggling was back of the secret orders. But what made this assignment out of the routine was the fact that Selwin Ogden was somehow connected with it.

Selwin Ogden was probably about the wealthiest man in Texas. An ex-governor of the Lone Star State, he owned millions of acres of cattle range, a string of hotels in El Paso, Houston, Dallas and Galveston, and a fleet of steamships on the Gulf. His avocation was collecting antique jewelry, and he was much sought after by high society in New York, London, Paris, Vienna and Cairo. Why, then, was he visiting Escalera, Texas?

JIM HATFIELD had never met Ogden. As a man dedicated to his Ranger work, he had never even laid eyes on a multi-millionaire let alone worked closely with one. But with Selwin Ogden leaving Escalera tomorrow for a trip abroad, Hatfield wouldn't get the chance to meet him at all—if he didn't extricate himself from this jungle maze in short order.

JIM HATFIELD

McDowell's telegram had said the case was a "big one," and that was enough for Jim Hatfield. McDowell invariably assigned his big cases to the Ranger he had nicknamed "The Lone Wolf" because of Hatfield's preference for working alone, and incognito, rather than work with the support of a Ranger troop. It had to be a big case, to bring a millionaire like Selwin Ogden to a festering river town like Escalera.

Removing a pair of military field glasses from a cantlebag, Jim Hatfield ground-hitched Goldy on the trail and started burrowing his way through the thorny brambles in the direction of a dead pine tree he had glimpsed some fifty feet off the trail. Looped over one shoulder, Hatfield carried his coiled lariat, his intention being to lasso an outjutting limb of the dead pine and haul himself up above the level of the chaparral. From an elevated perch he would be able to sweep the horizon and he was sure, identify a mountain peak or some other landmark, either on the Texas or Mexico side of the Rio Grande, and thus pinpoint his own location.

He was fighting his way through a particularly dense clump of yellow-blooming agarita, which he believed to be his last barrier in reaching the dead pine, when the brush gave way and Hatfield fell forward, thrusting out a foot to break his fall.

But his leg only encountered empty space. He was stepping over the brink of a sheer cliff!

A gasp of horror blew from the Lone Wolf's lips as his threshing arms scooped in a clump of agarita in a bearhug that meant life or death in this instant of time. He felt himself dropping, both legs plummeting into a chasm of air.

The agarita held, its tough roots clinging to soil on the very rim of the caprock. Hatfield's pumping legs got purchase on the stone face of the scarp. His boots fought for purchase on solid rock, and a moment later he was scrambling to safety on a flat ledge at the base of the dead pine tree he had been aiming to reach.

If the shock of having the earth drop out from under him was a horrifying experience, Hatfield's senses got an even worse jolt when, crawling to the base of the pine and getting a good grip on a jutting root, he turned his head for his first look at what lay below him.

The Lone Wolf's head reeled as he found himself looking down a hundred-foot-deep abyss, with the yellow waters of the Rio Grande gliding soundlessly along the pit of the gorge.

Hatfield had literally stumbled over the brink of the Rio Grande's canyon—with only a handful of wildflower shrubs between him and certain death on the broken talus below.

He did not need the binoculars to tell him where he was now. Two hundred yards across the canyon rose the sheer rock walls of Old Mexico, time-eroded basalt as old as a continent, with the purple ridges of the Mexican cordilleras sweeping off and away into indefinite distances to blend with a heat-pulsing horizon.

To his right, the Rio Grande vanished around a bend into the twisting gorge which Hatfield knew from past experience as one of the wildest, most dangerous areas in America. Leftward, downstream, the river suddenly vanished over the brink of a long series of rapids—the Devil's Staircase, where the river level was lowered two thousand feet in a quarter of a mile.

Out of sight at the foot of that series of churning cascades was located the town of Escalera, with its Mexican counterpart, Villa Diablo, crouching on the Chihuahuan bank. By air line, the town where Border Patrol Inspector Bob Chestwick and millionaire Selwin Ogden were awaiting his arrival was less than two miles from this spot, Hatfield estimated. By trail—and the Ranger saw now that the path he had been following emerged from the chaparral not far away to pick up a ledge descending into the canyon—the distance to Escalera was probably five times as far.

Legs trembling with fatigue and the release of tension from his narrow escape a moment past, Jim Hatfield came to his feet. His gamble had paid off; although he had been lost, at least his dead reckoning had brought him to the Rio Grande and as near to Escalera as if he had carried detailed maps of the short cuts.

He was turning back toward the brush, intending to burrow his way back to his waiting horse, when something—a glint of sunlight on glass or metal—diverted his attention to the river below.

Hatfield's eyes ranged along the Rio Grande bank. The river ran swift and deep out there, the current gaining momentum as the cliff walls narrowed and the surging waters started their plunge down the foaming cascades of the Devil's Staircase. The thought had struck Hatfield that if his eyes had caught a flash of light on a rowboat's oar blade, he would witness a tragedy in the next few moments. No swimmer or boatman could survive that rushing current heading for the rapids less than a mile down-river.

Seeing nothing, Hatfield unslung his field glasses and focussed them on the Texas bank of the river directly below. A moment later he was bringing the powerful lenses to bear on the figure of a girl, crouched on her knees behind a boulder alongside the riverbank trail, well hidden except from above.

RESTING on the boulder was a telescope, the brass trim of which had caught Hatfield's eye a moment before. The telescope was mounted on a sturdy tripod, he noticed, and was trained upriver toward the mouth of the Rio Grande gorge a mile away.

It was the girl's shoulder-long hair, red-gold even in the cloud-filtered sunlight of this murky day, which caught

Hatfield's interest now. She was young, around twenty, and was dressed in a man's blue shirt, bibless levis, and riding boots. She wore a gun at her hip, a Colt .45 of the same design as the twin Peacemakers thonged to Hatfield's thighs. The girl was so motionless as to resemble a statue, so intent was her absorption on whatever she was viewing through the telescope. There was an attitude of caution in her posture, as if the boulder was hiding her from something or someone; but study the up-river scene as he would, Jim Hatfield could see no movement, no unusual object, to account for the girl's vigil.

Her lookout post, he noticed, was not far off the trail he himself would be traveling in a few minutes, on his way down-river to Escalera. Since Escalera was the only settlement in a half day's riding from this remote area of West Texas, the girl probably lived in town.

Swinging the glasses back for a last look at the girl, Hatfield felt a guilty feeling wash over him, as if he were spying. The girl could not possibly guess that a strange pair of eyes was studying her from almost straight overhead; it was almost a Peeping Tom situation.

Hatfield saw the girl move back from the telescope, rubbing her eyes to rest them. Then she picked up a pair of binoculars and appeared to be surveying the rim of the Mexican cliffs across the river. After a few moments of that, she resumed her scrutiny through the telescope.

The Lone Wolf lowered the binoculars from his eyes and was surprised to see that the girl blended into her background so perfectly down there that, with the naked eye, he could not spot her hiding place behind the boulder.

Brushing the girl out of his thoughts, Jim Hatfield pulled his hatbrim down to shield his eyes from clawing thorns and plunged back into the agarita clump which had saved him from a fatal plunge into the chasm. From here on out, he told himself, the wild agarita would replace the Texas bluebonnet in his affections . . .

The sun was breaking through the lead-colored overcast, spilling its golden shafts into the awesome depths of the river canyon, when Ranger Hatfield rode out of the engulfing chaparral and put his sorrel onto the six-foot ledge which slanted at a roof-steep angle down the face of the north scarp.

Almost before he could adjust his weight in the saddle, he pulled Goldy to a quick halt.

Squatting on a flat outjutting shelf of rock at the top of the ledge was a Mexican in shabby shirt and pants and sisal straw sombrero, a peon of the lowest type to judge from his uncut mane of black hair, his lack of shoes, his scabrous flesh.

The peon had a Springfield rifle at his shoulder, aimed down into the canyon at a steep angle. So intent was the Mexican at lining his sights at some target below, he seemed completely unaware of the approach of a horse and rider from the chaparral trail at his back.

From his mounted position, Hatfield could almost sight down the rock-steady barrel of the Mexican's .45-70. The sunlight, flooding down into the canyon, picked out the gunhawk's target. It was human, and it was a girl's back. The girl with the telescope, crouched behind her boulder at the foot of this ledge.

Hatfield knew he had only seconds to draw cards in this deal. He knew that his orders specified that he not only reach Escalera as quickly as possible, but as unobtrusively. To take sides in an ambuscade, this close to the town, could be disastrous.

On the other hand, he could not stand by and see anyone drilled in the back with a .45-70 slug.

Swiftly transferring Goldy's reins to his left hand, the Lone Wolf lifted a bone-stocked Colt from holster. His thumb dogged the knurled hammer to cocked position, hoping the sound would divert the Mexican's attention without causing him to jerk trigger. But the peon did not appear to have heard, so complete was his concentration on the dry-gulch job at hand.

"Hold the trigger, Señor." Hatfield spoke softly, so as not to startle this man. He spoke in Spanish, a tongue he handled as fluently as English.

His words got through. Hatfield saw their impact lift the Mexican's burly shoulders, stiffening him for an instant. Then the Mexican came to his feet and turned around to face the Ranger. He had a Mongol slant to his eyes, and long, greasy black horsetail mustache that had a Chinese mandarin look.

"Just lay down the rifle, Señor," Hatfied ordered, meeting the reptilian glitter of the ambusher's eyes. "Then we'll make habla about what goes on here."

The Mexican shrugged, showing no concern. He tossed a glance over his shoulder, making no move to lay aside the rifle.

"The Señorita Ramona Chestwick is a friend, *quizas?*"

The peon's words startled Hatfield. Ramona Chestwick? She could be Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick's kin, then; perhaps his daughter.

"You have come too late, Senor," the Mexican said. "When she came up the canyon, Señorita Ramona was as good as dead. Even if you kill me, it will do no good. I am not alone."

At that precise instant the gunfire started down in the pit of the gorge, and Hatfield heard the girl's involuntary scream and knew Ramona Chestwick had been hit by flying lead.

CHAPTER II

River Fury

HATFIELD jerked his glance away from the leering Mexican, eyes shifting to the girl far below.

Relief flooded through him as he saw her vault the boulder where the telescope rested and head toward the river at a zig-zagging sprint, her red-gold hair streaming in the sun.

A gun was hammering somewhere down there, echoes volleying back across the river from the high sounding boards of the Mexican cliffs; but Hatfield could not locate the source of the shots.

The diversion nearly cost him his life now, for from the tail of his eye he saw the peon whipping the Springfield around and up to cover him, left hand lifting the barrel, right hand gripping the trigger, the stock hugged against his hip to steady his aim.

The Lone Wolf saw the shoot-sign coming to a boil in the Mexican's feral, mad-dog eyes. He saw the brown kunckle whiten to the pressure of finger on trigger.

Hatfield's gun slammed a shaved clock-tick ahead of the Springfield's heavier detonation. There had been no time to aim and the Ranger's slug caught the Mexican high on the left shoulder, hardly more than a flesh wound, but in this case as deadly as a point-blank shot to the brain or heart.

The impact of drilling lead spun the Mexican leftward enough to deflect his own aim, the Springfield bullet plucking a slot through the brim of Hatfield's stetson and making the chin cord jerk at his throat.

The Mexican opened his mouth to howl his agony, dropping the Springfield to clutch the blood-gushing bullet hole in his shoulder; but the continuing twisting momentum of the slug's impact threw him off balance and in the next instant Hatfield saw the peon cartwheeling backwards off his rocky perch.

With the smoke from his own gun blending with the black-powder smudge of the Mexican's rifle, Hatfield stared at the empty space where the peon had been standing a second before.

To his ears came the sodden, meaty crash of a body bouncing off a ledge below.

The Mexican was done for, and Hatfield thrust him out of his thoughts; he had fired in self-defense. His concern now was for the girl, Ramona Chestwick, fleeing for her life down in the pit of the

gorge, the target for a hidden marksman's bullets.

He spurred forward to get clear of the fouling powdersmoke, and heard the gunfire break loose again in a smashing cadence which told him that the unseen marksman's gun was following a running target.

Then Hatfield caught sight of the girl, and a shout of horror came from him as he realized what she was doing.

Ramona Chestwick was racing for the river's edge. Caught on the flat, rocky beach, she had no other recourse than to make for the water. Once in the river she would be safe from bullets. But the river itself, at this particular point, was as dangerous as gun lead. A swimmer would be swept over the downstream cataracts.

Hatfield drove the rowels into Goldy's flanks, sending the big stud hurtling down the ledge trail at suicidal speed. The horse almost tripped on the dead Mexican's rifle; for a few seconds Hatfield envisioned himself being hurled from saddle as the big stallion nearly went into a somersault at full stride, then recovered and, skidding on his haunches for a distance of twenty yards, recovered his footing and resumed the breakneck race down-slope.

Hatfield jabbed his Colt into leather and hauled the Winchester carbine from his saddle boot. He had a blurrred glimpse of Ramona as she reached the rocky ledge overlooking the ugly flow of the river and poised three, one arm dangling at her side like a broken wing on a bird.

He wanted to shout to her not to dive, but spurts of dust and gravel about her feet told Hatfield how near bushwhack lead was to cutting her down. She had a grim choice: to consign herself to the river, with less than one chance in a thousand of escaping the grim rapids of the Devil's Staircase, or being riddled by drygulch fire.

Ramona made the only possible choice. Hatfield saw her point for a moment on the edge of the rocky bank, like a diver on a springboard; and then she was arcing through space, disappearing from Hatfield's view as she hit the water.

The Lone Wolf had to concern himself with staying aboard Goldy's back now, as the stallion was thundering down the last stretch of ledge toward the main wagon road which skirted the Texas bank of the river.

Thus far, Hatfield had not glimpsed whoever was driving lead at the fleeing girl. The ambusher was using smokeless powder; and the tricky echoes from the Mexican cliffs prevented him from placing the source of the gunshots, which had now ceased.

GOLDY hit the level road at the foot of the Texas cliff at a full run. Bullets zipped past the Ranger's head with wasplike shrieks of sound, some of the slugs ricocheting off the cliff at his left. That established one thing, at least: the ambusher was down-river, and probably concealed in the timber which grew between the cliff base and the river road toward Escalera.

Getting Goldy under control, Hatfield reined in the direction of the river. The unseen ambusher was of less concern to him than the girl swiming out there in the millrace of the Rio Grande. She was probably wounded, and even if she was a strong swimmer the chances were that she would be swept to her death in the maw of the Devil's Stairway.

Goldy vaulted Ramona's boulder with the telescope still sitting there on its tripod, taking the barrier in stride like a trained steeplechaser. Ahead of him on the polished rocks above high-water line Hatfield noticed crimson splashes, like fresh paint, and knew that Ramona had been wounded by one of the ambusher's first shots.

Indirectly, Hatfield's appearance at the rimrock level had precipitated that attack. The peon's confederate had opened fire on Ramona at long range when he saw his partner in trouble.

Nearing the drop-off to the river proper, Goldy swung southeastward, paral-

leling the course of the river. By now, Hatfield knew, the swift-running flow of the Rio Grande had swept Ramona Chestwick a hundred yards or more downstream.

The golden stallion, sprinting like a racehorse on the home stretch, veered closer to the river. Hatfield's ears picked up the continued slam and crash of rifle shots from the hidden ambusher north of the road, and wondered if he or the girl was the target. His own attention was on the roiling surface of the river now, studying its eddies and débris-choked cross currents, seeking some trace of Ramona Chestwick in that churning surge.

The panicked thought struck him that she had been sucked under by the Rio Grande's treacherous currents. No swimmer, even without the added handicap of a wounded arm, could cope with the racing waters of this cliff-hemmed chute.

Then he saw her, a good thirty feet from shore. She was struggling to stay above water, her red-gold hair streaming in the muddy wash, the currents swirling her like a stick in a whirlpool.

Keeping afloat was the only thing left to the girl, Hatfield knew; she had forfeited any chance she might have had of gaining the Texas bank and keeping out of sight of the ambusher in the fringe of tules rimming the shoreline.

Hatfield was racing abreast of the girl now. He estimated the river's current at around ten knots, and it would increase in speed as the girl approached the glassy brink of the Devil's Staircase downriver.

That peril was only half a mile away now, and coming closer with every passing instant. Oblivious to the possibility that he might be nearing the hidden gunman's location, Hatfield roweled Goldy for a last burst of speed and headed for the stretch of gravel beach which led up to the brink of the quarter-mile-long series of rapids.

Goldy found a break in the cutbank and took it without Hatfield's touch at the reins. That brought the horse off the open flats between cliffs and river, onto the sandy beach next to the water, and more than likely out of the ambusher's view.

They were ahead of the floating girl now, but would not be for long; Ramona had already reached the beginning of the suction area caused by the narrowing of the canyon walls.

Booting his Winchester, since there was no visible target to use it on anyway, he unbuckled his lasso rope from the pommel and began shaking out a loop. Diving into the river and attempting to swim to the girl's rescue was useless, a foolhardy show of chivalry which would only cost him his own life and do nothing for Ramona. The rope was his only hope.

The gravel beach was pinching off now, narrowing as it neared the lip of the first rapids at the top of the Devil's Stairway. That first drop was really a waterfall fifty feet in height, rather than a rapids.

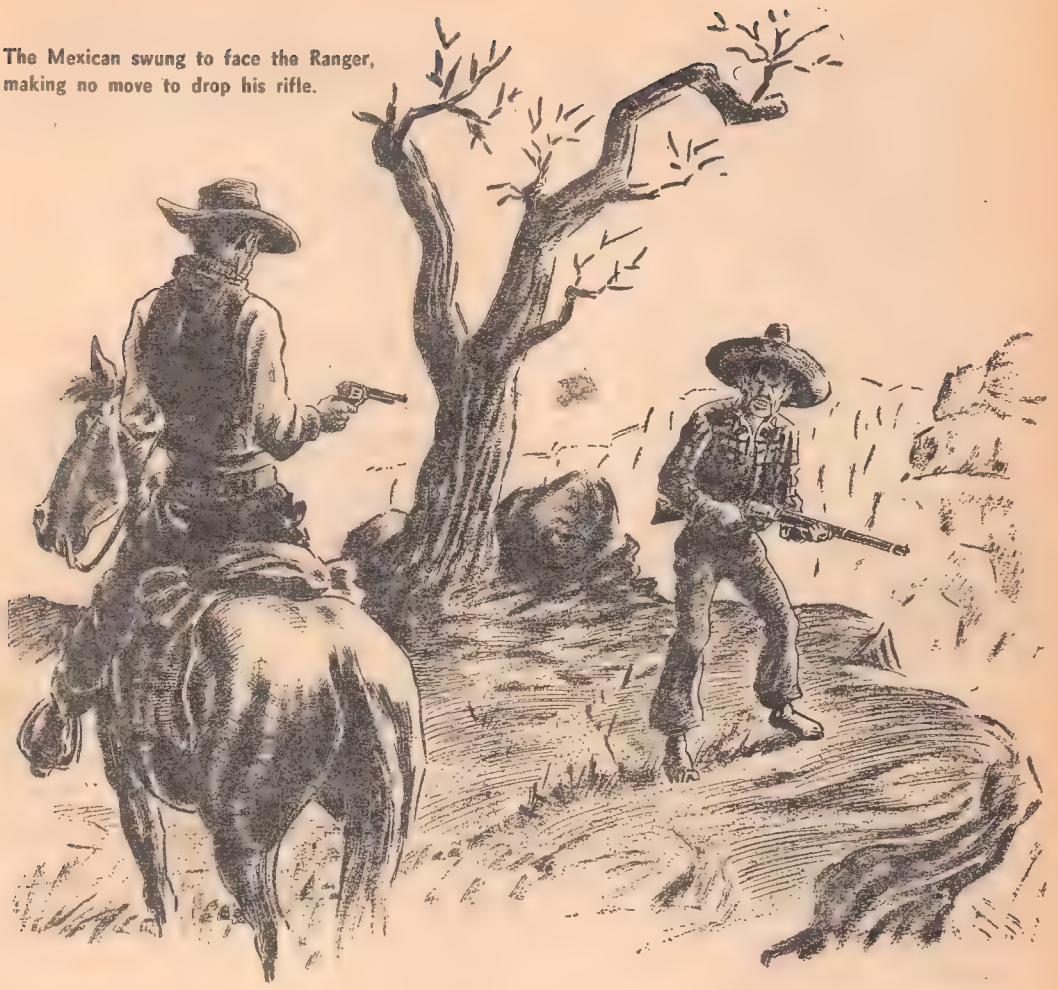
Where the beach ended, Goldy came to an exhausted halt. Hatfield swung from stirrups, lariat ready, and began clambering out on the great mass of water-smoothed boulders which, in aeons past, had jammed this narrow bottleneck at the head of the chutes.

Squinting against the sun glare upriver, he saw that Ramona was attempting to swim now, as she felt the dread suction of the falls gripping her body. Hatfield shouted, but he was within range of the thunder of the rapids now and knew the girl could not hear him.

Mysterious geysers were erupting from the water around the girl as she was swept closer. For a moment the cause of those dimpling ripples puzzled Hatfield, until he realized the gunman was still keeping Ramona under fire.

Poised on a boulder at the verge of the waterfall, Jim Hatfield began twirling his lariat now. It would take hair-trigger timing and aim, to make the rope noose reach the spot where the girl would be at a given instant.

Something sped past his cheek like an angry bee, with a tangible air-whip on his flesh. A bullet. The drygulcher was



The Mexican swung to face the Ranger, making no move to drop his rifle.

conceding that Hatfield had a chance to save the girl and was transferring his gunfire to the man instead, knowing Ramona was doomed if the man with the rope could be dropped.

HATFIELD cursed himself for not having anchored the rope to a rock, in the event a slug did cut him down after he had made his cast. But there was no time to regret bad judgment now.

The waters were swirling in toward the mouth of the falls now like a trough, V-shaped and wicked, frothy white against submerged rock.

Ramona Chestwick hit the apex of that V of water, going at blurring speed. She saw the tall, rangy figure in cowhand's garb poised on the rocks ahead, saw him make his cast, and thrust one arm upwards into the settling loop.

The rope snare slapped the water, circling the girl as she started her descent into the trough of racing waters. The raging current pulled her against the rope which her arm had caught.

Hatfield felt the rope snap taut, and knew his cast was true, that the half submerged girl was inside his loop, that the slipknot had tightened. She could lose

consciousness now and still be saved. It was up to him.

He caught the vaguest glimpse of the girl, under a foot of angry water, as she was swept over the brink of the falls. He fell to his knees, bracing himself for the shock of the girl's weight hitting the end of the rope.

It came, yanking the lariat coiled about his arms, nearly yanking them loose at the sockets, dragging him flat on his face on the up-stream of the boulder.

The rope was biting into his flesh. He locked his teeth against the pain, letting the weight of his body anchor the rope that stretched up and over the smooth crest of the rock. As long as that torturing pressure kept the rope taut, it meant Ramona Chestwick was still in his noose.

He felt the intolerable pull ease off. But the weight was still there; the rope hadn't broken, the girl hadn't slipped out of the noose. He took a quick dally around a protruding log and, free of the rope, began clambering up over the rocks.

Bellied down at the summit of the rock dam, he had his first look down the forty-degree slope of the rapids. Churning spray was filled with rainbows; the coolness, the thunder of the Devil's Stairway would have been comforting under different circumstances.

He pulled himself along the rope and peered over the edge. Relief flowed through him as he caught sight of Ramona's body swaying like a pendulum twenty feet below, brushing the dank, mossy surface of the rock wall alongside the roaring falls.

The rope was caught securely under her armpits; although she was obviously unconscious, there was little danger of her falling through the tight loop. Her shirt clung with skin-tight adhesion to her slim body, accentuating the tight swell of full arching breasts. Her right arm was drenched with blood under her sleeve, Hatfield noticed. Her gorgeous head of hair was now plastered to her skull like the fur on a soused rat.

He began pulling the rope hand-over-hand, until he could reach down and get his arms around the unconscious girl. If she had inhaled any water she might be in need of artificial respiration immediately. Then there would be time enough to worry about the unseen gunman who would be stalking them out of nowhere.

CHAPTER III

Mysterious Telescope

WITH the girl safely jacknifed over his shoulder, Jim Hatfield worked his way back down over the mammoth boulder, leaving the lariat dallied to the broken end of drift log.

A short scramble brought him across the rock dam and into a dense motte of cottonwood and willow and knee-deep water grass, verdure which was green the year 'round and extended in a dark belt down the canyon to the foot of the roaring cascades.

Choosing a level spot free of stones and broken twigs, the Lone Wolf laid the girl gently on her side and, ripping open the sleeve of her shirt, had a quick look at her bullet wound. The slug had gone in and out, leaving a shallow puncture wound.

A pulse beat strongly on the sun-bronzed column of Ramona Chestwick's throat, and she was breathing naturally. She was, he realized, in a state of semi-shock from fear and the physical ordeal of being buffeted in the angry waters of the river. So far as Hatfield could tell, she had inhaled no water; placing an ear to her chest, he could hear no evidence of clogged bronchial tubes.

Because his first-aid kit was back on the sandspit with Goldy, and in order to stem the bleeding from the girl's wound, Hatfield dusted the bullet-punctured flesh with tobacco flakes, one of the best emergency antiseptics he knew of, and bound the arm with his neckpiece.

The girl was beginning to mutter incoherently and her eyelids were fluttering by the time Hatfield had finished his makeshift bandage. Now that he had time to look the girl over at close range, he was struck by her comeliness under the worst possible conditions—hair drenched and tousled, clothes sopping with the dank and silt-laden water of the Rio Grande.

She had lost, or discarded the Colt .45 she had been carrying at the moment he had first discovered her from the rimrock. He noticed the monogram "R.C." worked into the fancy stitching of her boots. That jibed with the name Ramona Chestwick which the Mexican had mentioned. That this girl was related to Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick, the Lone Wolf now had little doubt.

The color was returning to her cheeks. Her eyes fluttered open and tried to focus on the man hunkered beside her, stetson tipped back off a shock of thick black hair, a quizzical grin on his lips.

"You've got nothing to worry about now, Ramona," Jim Hatfield said gently, seeing a wild frenzy strike the girl's amber-colored eyes as her mind became lucid again. "I just want you to lie low while I find out who was throwing lead at us."

The girl propped herself up on one elbow, plucking at the hickory skirt as if embarrassed at the discovery that its wet fabric was accentuating the voluptuous curves of her figure. The terror was still in her eyes; when her hand groped to gun holster and found it empty, she struggled to her knees with a tiny whimpering sound.

"You—you know my name," she mumbled almost incoherently. "Why don't you go ahead and kill me."

A wave of frustration swept Hatfield. Obviously Ramona Chestwick's brain was still in a state of shock. She believed he was the gunman who had been taking potshots at her; possibly her memory of his tossing the rope to her in the river had been erased by the horrors of being sucked into the maw of the Devil's Stairway a few moments back.

"I'm your friend, Ramona," Hatfield said, reaching out to touch her arm reassuringly, only to see her recoil. "I want you to keep low, out of sight, while I go after this hombre who *did* try to kill you."

The girl sagged back on her side, lungs heaving like the gills of a grounded fish. He was almost certain his words had not reached her.

He thought, if she knew I was a Texas Ranger, she'd know I'm the man her father sent for and it might snap her out of it.

But orders were orders. His lips were sealed even to the daughter of the Border Patrolman he was to meet today in Escalera. Captain McDowell's telegram had warned him specifically to reveal his Ranger status to no one except Inspector Bob Chestwick.

The girl was watching him with an almost hypnotic intensity, her mind groping back to reality by slow degrees. But there was no time to waste trying to talk Ramona Chestwick back to full possession of her senses, not with a rifle-toter stalking them somewhere back in the brush.

"Look, Ramona," he said softly. "All I can do is ask you to trust me—and for your own good, keep under cover while I'm gone. You've got to understand, Ramona, I'm not the gunhawk who was shooting at you. Later, perhaps very soon now, I can tell you who I am, and what I'm doing here in the canyon."

The girl's fingers combed snarled strands of hair back from her face, anger replacing the blank vacuity in her eyes now.

"You're just a paid drygulcher!" Ramona Chestwick flared, her voice losing some of its whimpering quality. "What made you haul me out of the river? You knew I dove in to escape you. You also knew the current caught me, that I was a goner—"

A CRASHING sound back in the brush startled Hatfield then, made him aware of the danger he still faced

from the mysterious gunman whose shots had driven this girl into the river, and whose slugs had so narrowly missed cutting him down.

Someone was coming through the brush, recklessly, with no attempt at caution. Hatfield leaped to his feet, guns palmed. He flicked a quick look over his shoulder at the girl, who apparently had not heard the alien sound.

"Lie down in that grass," Hatfield ordered sharply, "and keep down out of sight. I'll try to dab my loop on that bushwhacker of yours and we'll find out what the deal is—"

There was no time to see if the girl had obeyed him. Hatfield, bent in a low crouch, got out from under the willow-brake, moving in toward the wagon road, in the direction of whoever it was he heard slogging down the slope toward the river.

He was fifty feet from the spot where he left Ramona when a horse's whicker, near at hand, startled him. He glanced around through the deep shadows and caught sight of a steeldust gelding, saddled and bridled on picket in a small clearing. A red leather cylinder was tied behind the cantle, which Hatfield recognized instantly as the carrying case for a telescope. The steeldust, then, was Ramona's mount, the horse she had hidden here before carrying her telescope out to the vantage point behind the big boulder.

There was no time for further conjecture. The bushwhacker was close enough now for Hatfield to hear the jingle of spurs as the gunman threaded his way through the thick brush.

Hatfield eased himself over behind a scaly sycamore trunk, knowing the gunman would have to cross an open area if he kept coming in the same direction.

Thumb on gunhammer, the Lone Wolf waited, his pulses hammering as the suspense mounted. A lot of mysteries could be cleared up if he could take this hombre alive and question him about a few things. Why it was so important to gun down a girl like Ramona Chestwick, among other things . . .

And then the brush parted and Hatfield got his first look at his adversary. He could hardly believe what he saw.

It was not the man he had anticipated, but a *vieja,* a Mexican woman with a puckered face as withered and brown as a mummy's, with white streaks in her flowing, witchlike mane of hair.

The woman was dressed like a man of the upper middle classes—a costly serape with a black and white zebra-stripe pattern, gold-braided charro jacket, flare-bottomed *pantalones* with vivid red satin triangles in the seam slashes.

In her hand, her incredibly withered, sticklike hand, the crone was carrying a Remington repeating rifle, .30-30 caliber, which she was using to fend off the whipping branches. A bandolier of ammunition was slung over one shoulder, and Hatfield noticed that many of the loops were empty.

The Mexican woman looked like a witch out of a fairy tale book. Probably past sixty years of age, her mouth was open as she gasped under the hard breathing of her exertion, revealing two or three yellowed snags of teeth. There was a Mongoloid cast to her features which told Hatfield that she was probably the mother of the dissolute-looking Mexican he had killed up there at the crest of the cliff trail.

The crone stumbled on an unseen rock in the grass and fell to her knees, breaking her fall with the Remington .30-30. Jim Hatfield chose that moment to move out from behind the sycamore.

Gun leveled at hip height, the Lone Wolf called out softly, "*Maños altos,* old woman. You will not kill the Señorita."

The ancient one bounced to her feet, rheumy eyes cataract-clouded but picking him out of the pattern of light and shadow. They were eyes that held a shuddery reptilian glitter in their inky depths. Then she spoke in a raspy, cawing Spanish:

"The Señorita went over the Escalera del Diablo?"

Before Hatfield could make any answer, the crone spun about and started back into the concealment of the brush, ignoring the six-gun drop Hatfield held on her.

"Hey!" shouted the Lone Wolf, tilting his gun muzzle skyward. "Halt or I shoot."

The woman's answer to that ultimatum was a derisive, hyena-like cackle as she vanished with a blur of zebra-striped serape into the sheltering chaparral.

Jim Hatfield flung himself belly down in the knee-high grass, realizing that the Mexican woman now held the advantage. It had been impossible for him to pull trigger when he could have done so; you don't go around shooting old ladies in the back even though this particular harridan was as deadly as a black widow spider and probably just as ruthless.

The Remington exploded once, a bullet whistling over the Ranger's head; and then he heard the passage of the old woman's body slithering through the brush toward the road at a speed that was incredible for one so emaciated, so old, so seemingly frail.

HATFIELD felt his cheeks burn with humiliation as he got to his feet and charged in pursuit of the adversary he was mentally calling the Chihuahau Witch. There was an unreal quality about this meeting, a sort of Halloween atmosphere to the whole thing. But one thing was uppermost in the Ranger's mind: Border Patrol inspector Bob Chestwick would want the old crone brought in a prisoner, seeing as how hard she had tried to murder his daughter.

A moment later Jim Hatfield broke out of the brush onto the wheel-rutted wagon road which followed the Texas side of the river. He was in time to see the old Mexican woman, crouched in a high-peaked Moorish saddle, hurtling off around a bend aboard a copper-bottomed pony.

A swirl of sun-glowing dust, and the incredible old woman was gone, hammering down the following grade toward Escalera. She and her son, according to Hatfield's deductions had come up river stalking a Border Patrolman's daughter. They had seen their murder scheme exploded by the untimely interruption of a stranger on a golden stallion, riding out of the brasada from the north. The son now lay dead in the talus a quarter mile up river; the mother had chosen flight to capture, taking her chances that the gringo stranger would not put a slug in her back at point blank range.

Hatfield's shoulders slumped. If Goldy was within whistling distance, he would have given chase to the incredible old crone in the gaucho costume. But Goldy was down at the water's edge near the brink of Devil's Staircase where the witchlike old woman believed Ramona Chestwick had been swept to her doom.

Ramona! Hatfield had forgotten the half-drowned girl he had left back in the sycamore thicket. He turned, intending to retrace his steps to the clearing, when he heard a thud of iron-shod hoofs striking rock back in the brush.

Instantly alert, realizing that the old crone might have had several confederates with her, Hatfield withdrew hastily to the shelter of a windfallen loblolly pine beside the road and squatted down, resting his Colt barrel on the fallen log.

A rider broke into the open, entering the long, curving corridor of the road which hugged the Rio Grande cliff—a rider who reined down-canyon and spurred at once into a reaching gallop.

"Ramona!"

Hatfield called the girl's name at the top of his lungs as he realized that Chestwick's daughter was forking that speeding horse. He recognized the steeldust gelding as quickly as he did the slim, water-soaked figure in the saddle.

If the girl heard his shout, she gave no sign. The same bend in the road that had concealed the Mexican woman quickly hid the girl from view.

Hatfield groaned. It would take him a good ten minutes to work his way back over the rocks and logjams to reach his own horse; by that time Ramona Chestwick would be at the bottom of the Stairway grade, back to the safety of the town.

"Providing," the Lone Wolf muttered angrily to himself, "that Chihuahua Witch doesn't fort up and pick her off from ambush."

Not in many a blue moon had Jim Hatfield felt as frustrated and downright mystified over a set of circumstances as he did now. He also felt exceedingly foolish. The newspaper writers who delighted in building him up as a legendary hero of the Texas frontier would snicker behind their hands if they could see him now, Hatfield thought morosely.

"I let two women get the best of me! And I don't know any more about who either one of them are or what brought them here than I did before I got Roaring Bill's telegram."

It helped a little to know that within an hour he would be checking in at the Border Patrol office in Escalera and presenting his Texas Ranger credentials to the great Bob Chestwick in person. In all probability Chestwick would put him up at his own quarters in town tonight, and Hatfield would get a chance to meet Ramona under happier circumstances. Maybe Ramona would be able to identify the old woman with the Remington rifle and the zebra-striped serape.

HE FELT a little better when he was back aboard Goldy, retracing his way back to the foot of the ledge trail to have a look at the dead Mexican. He'd be sending the Escalera undertaker back up canyon with his hearse wagon to pick up the bushwacker's broken body at the foot of the cliff. His identity might prove valuable to Bob Chestwick of the Border Patrol. If so, it was the only useful thing that Hatfield had to show for the incredible events which had taken place in the past half hour.

Passing the smooth-topped boulder where Ramona Chestwick had been crouched, Hatfield dismounted and squatted down beside the telescope on its tripod. It was stamped "Property US Govt." he noticed; the spyglass probably belonged to Ramona's father, as part of his equipment for patroling the Rio Grande border.

"I wonder," Hatfield mused, "what was so danged interesting at the other end of that telescope."

Leaning forward, the Ranger put his eye close to the telescope. The locking mechanism of the tripod, plus the fact that the glass was rigidly supported across the top of the boulder, meant that Hatfield's view, through the powerful forty-diameter lenses, was exactly the scene Ramona had been looking at so intently when the old woman's ambush bullet had clipped her arm.

Peering through the telescope now, all Hatfield could see was a patch of tules growing at the foot of a yellow claybank about a mile away, at the point where the Rio Grande curved out of sight into the upper canyon.

"I don't see anything so interesting about that," Jim said aloud.

For several minutes, Hatfield studied the scene, until his eyes ached from the strain. But he saw nothing whatsoever out of the ordinary about the field of view Ramona had aimed her telescope at and then carefully locked in place.

There were only waist-high tules jutting like bristles on a hairbrush from a sun-checkered mudbank at the edge of the Rio Grande, with a yellow shale ledge behind it, and, outside the range of the glass's field of view, dense willow and cottonwood bosques behind that.

Yet it had to be important, or else why would a Border Patrolman's daughter have come to this desolate canyon site to focus her telescope on that tule bed? Why had two mysterious Mexicans stalked the girl with the telescope with intent to murder?

"Only one way to find out, I reckon," Hatfield said, getting to his feet. "I'll have to pay that patch of tules a visit. And if I find anything interesting, report it to Bob Chestwick."

CHAPTER IV

The Telescope's Target

BACK in saddle, Hatfield turned Goldy up-river until he reached a break in the cutbank, which lifted them

to the sandy beach and enabled Goldy to get back to the wagon road where the going was easier.

Sight of a *zopilote* buzzard spiraling on motionless pinions high overhead, its shadow sweeping across the chocolate colored Texas cliffs, reminded the Lone Wolf of the Mexican his point-blank slug had dumped off the caprock.

Looking up, he realized he was directly under the dish-shaped slab of stone which overhung the summit of the ledge trail. There was where the Mexican had been sprawled, sighting his rifle on Ramona's back. In falling, Hatfield remembered his body had struck an outjutting ledge further down, which the Ranger now located, mid-way up the cliff.

Thus oriented, he had no trouble spotting the broken body of the *pelado*, lying in the talus at the foot of the scarp. Before he could report the Mexican's death to the proper authorities in Escalera, he knew predatory animals, or that wheeling bird of prey up there, could easily mutilate the corpse and make identification difficult.

The grisly chore of toting the dead man back to Escalera this afternoon was a duty he could hardly escape. The *pelado*, whoever he was, undoubtedly had some connection with the "million dollar case" Inspector Bob Chestwick was working on, down here on the border.

Dismounting, Hatfield untied his bedroll behind the cantle and broke loose a tarpaulin. Goldy, scenting the odor of death up there in the sun-scaled rocks, pawed the road and whickered nervously as Jim Hatfield, toting the canvas tarp, started climbing up the jumbled talus toward the body.

Arriving there, he made a cursory examination of the broken gore-spattered hulk. He found nothing by way of identification in the Mexican's pockets. There was a red rose tatooed on one forearm with the Spanish legend *Buena Fortuna*, which the local coroner might find useful.

Covering the body with the tarp and weighting the edges down with rocks so as to give at least temporary protection against scavenging fangs or talons, Hatfield made his way back to Goldy and swung aboard.

The accumulated weariness of his overland trek from Fort Davis rested heavily on his nerves and muscles now. He had an overpowering urge to rein Goldy around and head for Escalera to hunt up Bob Chestwick's Border Patrol office. The quicker he did that, the quicker he would find out what connection Selwin Ogden, the financier, had to do with this strange mission. And, he reminded himself, the quicker he would be able to identify himself to Ramona, who would probably describe her would-be assassin to her father as a lanky Texan in rangeland garb who was a deadeye with a rope.

Returning to Escalera was the easiest thing to do right now; and would be following out the letter of his orders from headquarters. But it would leave unsolved the nature of the target for Ramona's telescope, up there at the bend of the Rio Grande gorge where the tules grew. At close range, he might be able to spot whatever it was Ramona Chestwick had been spying upon.

He covered the mile of intervening road at a jog trot, favoring Goldy, who had expended his last reserve of power in winning the race with Ramona Chestwick to the brink of the Rio Grande rapids.

Where the wagon road to Presidio snaked off through a side defile in the Texas wall of the canyon, Jim Hatfield spurred the sorrel down to the water's edge and followed the river upstream until he reached the bright green tule growth.

Even at close range, the Lone Wolf could see nothing of interest here; yet he was positive this was the focal point of Ramona's telescope. Was this a stage across which unknown actors had been expected to move? The sun-baked mud revealed many tracks leading to water, but the story they told was a confusing one, and weeks old.

Hatfield saw the marks of Texas cowboots leading horses down to the river's edge, the barefoot trail of full grown men,

the hoofprints of horses and cattle, coyotes and all manner of chaparral birds. But as the drought season caused the river level to receed, the sun had hardened the mudbank to the hardness of firebrick, over which a man or a horse could move without leaving visible sign.

Above and behind the tules was a low shale bank topped by a ledge. Hatfield stepped down from stirrups and climbed up to that ledge, remembering that it was inside the field of vision of Ramona's telescope, as well as the willow and cottonwood bosque behind it.

A few minutes' poking around netted the Ranger no clues as to why anyone should keep watch on this particular spot. Suddenly the thought occurred to Hatfield that he was wasting time and energy out here in the river canyon. All he had to do, after all, was locate Ramona Chestwick after he reached Escalera. Once she knew who he was, she would allay his curiosity about the telescope and tell why she was so interested in this bed of tules.

PROBABLY, he thought wrily, it will turn out that she was just bird-watching. But logic refuted such an innocent explaination; two Mexicans had attempted to murder the girl, and they would hardly do that for anything as trivial as bird watching. Unless the bird-watcher's telescope was spying on something else.

Hatfield was heading back along the rim of the ledge above the tule bed when a gaunt-necked buzzard suddenly rose from a shadowy, mashed-out area in the center of the tule growth and, giant wings threshing the air to gain altitude, passed close enough to the man to make the wind of the passage felt.

The Ranger halted stockstill. Buzzards, with their telescopic vision, had an uncanny ability to locate carrion in hard-to-see places. Nothing else but dead flesh would lure a buzzard down into the canyon, and especially into a bed of tules. What dead thing had attracted the loathsome bird of prey?

The tule bed, at this point, was perhaps twenty feet wide. The flattened area, making a shadowy hole in the hairbrush-thick growth of green reeds, was too far from the edge of the bank for Hatfield to look down. But whatever was down there had attracted the buzzard—and so recently that the bird had not had time to gorge itself to a point where it could not fly.

The hairs on Hatfield's neck prickled. Ordinarily he would not have risked exploring tules so close to the river's edge, for fear of getting mired down in quicksand. But with everything so dry this year, he decided to risk it. A moment later he was lowering himself from the brink of the ledge and dropping his own height into armpit-deep tules.

Goldy, cropping grass a few feet away, headed up as he heard the crash and clatter of snapping tules as the big Ranger worked his way toward the mysterious hole in the center of the bed.

A moment later Hatfield again found himself looking upon death in human form.

A bearded white man lay face down in the tules, a man clad in bushpopper jumper, bib overalls, and Wellington boots. He appeared to be in his early fifties. A few feet from his head, caught in broken tules, was a straw sombrero made of sisal fibers, of a type common along the border during the hot season; there were artificial flies and fishhooks caught in the band.

"This must have been what Ramona was watching . . . maybe she saw this hombre killed and flung into these—"

Hatfield broke off. In the act of rolling the corpse over on its back, he saw the cause of death: a thick-shafted arrow imbedded at an acute downward angle into the man's chest, where the neck joined the torso.

And then, for the first time, Hatfield noticed that the dead man's right hand was clutching something—another arrow, identical to the one which had caused his death. This arrow was without a steel or flint tip, but its feathered vanes were

dipped in scarlet dye at the tips and the cabalistic markings on the shaft were identical on both arrows, reminding Hatfield of Aztec designs he had seen on ancient calendar stones.

Hatfield placed the heel of his palm on the dead man's cheek. The body was still warm; when he lifted a hand and let it drop the arm was pliable and limp as string.

"Hasn't been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in," Hatfield murmured. "Probably within the hour, in fact."

Again, as he had done in the case of the Mexican back down the canyon, the Lone Wolf began going through pockets seeking some means of identification. He found the usual miscellany a man carries in his pockets—cigarette papers, Durham sack, loose change in both Mexican and American coinage, nails, a .45 cartridge.

There was no wallet, no letter with a name on it, no initials in the hatband. On closer examination Hatfield found a Bowie knife hidden in a sheath under the dead man's shirt. The holster on the single cartridge belt carried an ordinary cedar-butted Army .44 single-action revolver, with no identifying initials on it.

Very gently, Hatfield extricated the Aztec-like arrow from the dead man's hand. The shaft had not been broken; the arrowhead had apparantly been fitted to the blunt end of the shaft with stout thongs of threads of some type. The abscence of bloodstains convinced Hatfield that this man had not died in the act of tugging one arrow out of his flesh.

Assuming the arrows were the same length, the Lone Wolf deduced that the ambush arrow itself was penetrating the upper lobe of the man's left lung. Crimson spume on the brown beard was further proof of internal bleedings.

HATFIELD got to his feet, peering around him. The dead man was heavy-set, weighing in the neighborhood of two hundred pounds; it was doubtful if one man, or even two men, could have killed him up on the ledge and hurled his body this far out from the bank to conceal it.

On the other hand, it was highly im-

A TALL TEXAS TALE

SHAVE AND A HAIR-CUT

A TEXAN was sitting at a bar with a huge yellow dog, with big brown eyes, when another fellow came in with a bull terrier.

"Bub," said the newcomer, "you better take that big yellow dog of yours out. My bull terrier doesn't like other dogs."

The Texan said, "Aw, gee, my big yellow dog just likes to sit here and drink beer quietly."

So the fellow with the bull terrier said, "Go get him, boy!"

The bull terrier charged and the big yellow dog let out a little roar, and all of a sudden there was the bull terrier lying dead on the barroom floor.

The fellow who owned the bull terrier gasped and said, "Where in the world did you get that big yellow dog?"

The Texan said, "Oh, a friend of mine sent him to me from Africa. And you should have seen the head of hair he had when I first got him!"

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

probable tnat any man would intentionally fight his way through a tangle of tules to reach this spot; and if he had he would hardly have been a target for a bow and arrow expert, since the tules at this point were higher than the dead man was tall.

"It all seems to tie in, everything that's happened since I came in sight of the river," Hatfield told himself. He ticked off items on his fingers, trying to find some common pattern linking them together: first he had located a girl down in the canyon whom he was convinced was a Border Patrolman's daughter; she had been under fire by two Mexicans, one of whom was now dead, the other, a withered crone, was still at large; the girl's attention had been centered on this tule bed a mile from her telescope—and his own curiosity had led Hatfield to these tules and a well-concealed dead man. What was even more significant, the dead man had probably been alive an hour ago.

Here, definitely, was a body he could not allow to remain where it was. His timely arrival had kept the buzzard from mutilating the remains, but during the time it would take him to ride to Escalera and summon the coroner, a whole flock of scavenger birds might have asembled here.

An attempt at getting the dead man jackknifed across his shoulders convinced Hatfield that he could never carry the man out of the thicket. Dragging him out at rope's end was the only possible alternative.

Holding the Aztec arrow he had taken from the dead man's hand, Jim Hatfield squirmed his way toward the river side of the tule bed, his boots miring in ankle-deep muck. Recently-broken reeds told him that the dead man had entered the thicket by that route. But what had he been searching for in such an unlikely spot? Or had he been dead when he was placed there?

Hatfield was grasping with exertion when he broke into the open and whistled Goldy to his side. Very carefully he stowed the mysterious arrow under the flap straps of a saddlebag, after which he unbuckled his wet lariat from the pommel. Dallying one end securely to the saddle horn, Hatfield re-entered the tule bed and made his way back to the corpse.

This time he made a more detailed examination of the area, in case the man had dropped something. He found nothing. Anything heavy, he realized, would be imbedded in the black mud where the tules had taken root, anyway.

The angle the arrow had struck the man was curious, for it had probably been fired at a steep downward angle, or else had been shot vertically into the air and had struck the man down at the end of its flight.

After tying the lariat noose securely around the dead man's torso, Hatfield returned to Goldy's side, slashing a narrow path through the tules to facilitate dragging out his gruesome discovery.

So intent was the Ranger on his work that he was not aware of the approaching horsemen coming down from the road until Goldy's whicker of equine greeting alerted him. Whirling about, his hand was streaking to gunstock as he saw two riders spur around the corner of the tules, almost on top of him.

"Lift 'em, stranger."

The command from the younger of the two riders, a hard-bitten man of forty on whose shirt front glinted a law badge. The order was backed up by the yawning black bore of a sawed off single-barrel shotgun, .410 gauge, pointed straight at Hatfield's chest.

The lawman's companion was a distinguished-looking man of sixty-odd who wore a funeral black coat and hard beaver hat. He held a short-barreled Bisley .38 pistol in one hand, the reins in the other.

"Howdy, gents," Jim Hatfield said huskily, releasing his grip on his own Colt butt and lifting his hands hatbrim high. His glance swung to the man with the shotgun. "If that star means you're a law rider, I'm glad you showed up."

The black-coated man accepted the reins which the other tossed him. As the shotgun toter started to dismount his older companion said, "This here is Nate

Willowby, sheriff of the county." Then turning to the Sheriff, he said, "I think you've nabbed the hombre Ramona was trying to describe, Nate."

SHERIFF Nate Willowby, leaving his partner to keep Hatfield covered, came sliding around his horse, having deposited his .410 Greener in a saddle scabbard. From a hip pocket the star-toter fished a pair of glittering nickel-plated handcuffs. He was wearing bull-hide chaps and a beaded Indian-made calfhide vest.

"Believe you're right, Mayor," Willowby clipped, reaching out gingerly to pluck one of Hatfield's Peacemakers from leather and thrust it under the waistband of his chaps. When the second six-gun was removed, Willowby said gruffly, "lower your hands, wrists together. You're under arrest, stranger."

Hatfield's heart was hammering his ribs. He was remembering his orders: reveal your Ranger identity only to Border Patrol Inspector Bob Chestwick.

As the sheriff notched his steel fetters over Hatfield's wrists, the Lone Wolf's attention swung to the silver-haired man sitting his saddle alongside them.

"You wouldn't be Inspector Chestwick, would you?" he asked hopefully.

The man shook his head. "The name's Sean Detwiler. I have the honor to be the mayor of the town of Escalera and one of Bob Chestwick's closest friends. Who might you be?"

Hatfield licked his lips, his glance shuttling from Detwiler to the sheriff. The latter was running his gaze over Goldy, scowling curiously at the soaking-wet lariat which slanted from the sorrel's saddle horn into the broken lane through the tules.

"I asked you," Mayor Detwiler said, his voice rising sharply, "who you were? Bob Chestwick's girl claims you tried to bushwack her."

Hatfield noted that both Detwiler's blue roan and the sheriff's pinto saddler were dripping lather and breathing hard. They could not possibly have climbed the grade and got to this point, Hatfield knew, if they had come all the way from the town at the foot of the Devil's Stairway.

"I'm sorry," Hatfield said carefully, "but I'm not at liberty to say who I am. Not until I've talked to Inspector Chestwick."

The sheriff's red-rimmed eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

"You a friend of Chestwick's?"

Hatfield shook his head. "I've never met the man. I have a message for him from a friend."

Sheriff and Mayor exchanged glances. Then Nate Willowby extended a palm. "Let's see the message," he demanded curtly.

"It was a verbal message, for Mr. Chestwick only. He's in Escalera, isn't he?"

Ignoring the question, the sheriff asked, "Are you a Border Patrolman in range duds, maybe?"

Again Hatfield shook his head. "I'm not one of Chestwick's patrol riders, no."

Saddle leather creaked as Mayor Detwiler shifted his corpulent bulk. "Stop asking stupid questions, sheriff!" the town official snapped. "If this man was a border patrolman working incognito, he wouldn't have opened fire on Ramona."

Willowby purpled, but nodded in agreement. "All right, stranger—how come you were taking pot shots at that young lady? And don't try to lie out of it. The Mayor and I met her riding hell for leather down the Stairway Grade not twenty minutes ago, maybe half an hour. She described you to a T, said you were trying to bushwack her."

Very patiently, Hatfield said, "She didn't tell you I fished her out of the river?"

The mayor said quietly, "Ramona was almost hysterical. Sheriff, what are we waiting for? This man can be lodged in the town *juzgado* and Ramona can identify him positively."

Willowby nodded, snapping himself out of the dark run of his thoughts. "Yeah, yeah, Mayor," the sheriff said.

It was obvious to Jim Hatfield that Sean Detwiler was a bigger authority around

the river town than the county sheriff was. The sheriff then asked, "But first, what's the rope on your saddle horn, stranger? What're you dabbing your loop on, back in them tules?"

Hatfield stared down at his handcuffed wrists. It was suddenly dawning on him that he was in considerable trouble at the moment. Accused of trying to ambush Ramona Chestwick, he knew he stood to be lodged in jail temporarily, until Ramona's father could arrange his release. But the bombshell he had to divulge right now would put him in an even worse light.

"The other end of that rope," Hatfield said quietly, "is tied around a dead man."

Mayor Detwiler jerked erect in saddle, the color bleaching from his florid cheeks at the news. Sheriff Willowby's eyes bulged from their sockets as he followed the lariat's drooping line back into the trampled corridor through the reed thicket.

"A dead man!" Willoughby echoed. "Who?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Since I'm a stranger in these parts, I couldn't say. Haul him out and see."

Willoughby started to reach for Goldy's bitstring, only to draw back in alarm as the horse bared its teeth and reared back, snorting its warning.

"'*Sta bueno,* you finish the job you were doing when Detwiler and I caught you red-handed!" snarled the sheriff, drawing a six-gun. "Hustle it up. Haul out that dead one."

A moment later Hatfield was leading Goldy away from the fringe of the tule thicket, toward the river. The sheriff and Mayor Detwiler were staring at the other end of the rope which slanted down into the tules, listening to the grisly crackling of reeds as the corpse was pulled into view.

Mayor Detwiler turned a ghastly shade of yellow, swaying in saddle as he stared down at the dead man's face, at the ambush arrow jutting from the base of the neck.

"Oh—it can't be!" groaned Sam Detwiler, turning away with a gagged oath. "No, no, no—"

At a gesture from the sheriff, Hatfield halted Goldy. Six-gun palmed, Nate Willowby stalked over to hunker down by the dead man, studying the face thoughtfully.

Then, very slowly, he turned his drill-straight stare on Jim Hatfield.

"Getting back to what you told me—you say you have a message to deliver to Inspector Chestwick?" Willowby asked.

"Yes."

"Well," the sheriff said, "you must have killed him after you delivered it, then. This dead man is Bob Chestwick, chief of the Presidio Division, United States Border Patrol. Or didn't you know that?"

CHAPTER V

Ramona's Verdict

A SICK stabbing pain knifed through the Lone Wolf Ranger. His numbed senses refused to accept Sheriff Willowby's words as true. But they made sense. It made sense that Ramona Chestwick could have been watching her father through the telescope. But had she seen him cut down by the mysterious arrow?

"Well," snarled Detwiler, his voice shaky as he dismounted. "Answer the sheriff. Did you know it was Chestwick?"

When he finally spoke, Hatfield's voice sounded guilty in his own ears: "I didn't kill Chestwick. I only discovered his body."

The sheriff grinned without mirth. "You killed him, just like you tried to kill his daughter, Ramona. At first you hid his carcass in them tules, and then you decided to snake him out of there and drag him into the river and weight him down with rocks. That's what you were doing when Mayor Detwiler and I rode up and caught you."

Hatfield opened his mouth to reply, then closed it. With Bob Chestwick dead,

he had no one to turn to. The name of Selwin Ogden, the multi-millionaire, crossed his mind; Ogden was in Escalera and he had some connection with whatever case Border Patrolman Chestwick had been working on when he was murdered by the ambush arrow.

But, Hatfield found himself thinking, what if Selwin Ogden was not a friend and confederate of Chestwick's, but a criminal Chestwick intended to expose, perhaps as an international smuggler?

"I'll tell my story," Hatfield said finally, "in due time. You've made up your mind I killed Bob Chestwick. This isn't just the time nor the place to argue about it. Go ahead and take me to your jail."

Mayor Detwiler, white-faced and shaking was very careful to avoid looking at the corpse of the Border Patrolman. He stumbled over to stand beside the sheriff. Then Detwiler lifted a shaking hand to point toward Goldy.

"L-Look, sheriff. If this stranger says we need proof that he fired that arrow at Bob—he's carrying a spare!"

The sheriff's brows shot up with excitement as he strode past Hatfield and snatched the Indian arrow from the spot where Hatfield, a few moments before, had threaded it carefully through the supporting straps of one of the *alforja* bags.

"It's a dead ringer for the one sticking out of Bob's brisket, all right!" agreed the lawman, inspecting the curious weapon carefully. "Looks to be Mexican, Yaqui maybe, but not Kiowa or Comanche, wouldn't you say, Mayor?"

Detwiler gestured toward Hatfield. "Ask your prisoner. Ask him where he stashed the bow, while you're at it. And why there isn't a head on the shaft. Makes you wonder if they were detachable heads you could fill with poison, the way the Injuns do in South America."

The sheriff turned to Hatfield, gesturing toward the arrow.

"All right, bucko—how about it?"

Hatfield shrugged. What was the use in claiming he had taken that headless arrow from Bob Chestwick's dead hand?

"Let's load Chestwick across my saddle," Hatfield suggested, "and get started for town." He added, remembering the Mexican he had covered with the tarp: "On our way down-canyon, there's another corpse to pick up also, gentlemen. This one has my .45 slug in his shoulder —not an arrow."

IT FELT cooler in the jail cell after sundown had poured its purple and indigo shadows into the river.

The sheriff had forced Hatfield to walk all the way into town, leading Goldy. Bob Chestwick's corpse, shrouded in one of Hatfield's soogans to prevent the Border Patrolman being recognized when they were working their way down Escalera's narrow, terraced streets, was jacknifed across the saddle.

Willowby had grudgingly given up his own mount so that it could carry the body of the Mexican *pelado*. Hatfield had been disappointed when neither Willowby nor the mayor had been able to identify the Mexican who had been in the act of bushwhacking Ramona Chestwick. He was not a local hoodlum, then.

They had left the two dead men off at the county coroner's morgue, following which Hatfield, still unwilling to make his identity known, was booked in Willowby's jail as Joe Doe, on a charge of suspicion of homicide.

The jail cell had a single barred window which overlooked most of the town of Escalera, the Rio Grande, and the Mexican village of Villa Diablo on the far side.

By standing on the cot which was the sole item of furniture in the six-by-six cage, Hatfield could thus get a view of the settlement which marked the end of navigation on the Rio Grande. The drabness of the town, the Texas settlement as poverty-blighted as its counterpart on the Mexican bank, pointed up the incongruity of an international playboy like millionaire Selwin Ogden paying the town a visit.

Something very important must have lured Ogden to Escalera. Something important enough to have impelled Bob

Chestwick of the Border Patrol to enlist the aid of the Lone Wolf Ranger.

The Devil's Stairway made a spectacular sight, slanting down through the cliff-bordered slot of the canyon to end at the edge of town. Across the roiling brown waters at the foot of the last falls, where riverboats were tied up on both sides of the river, the lights of Villa Diablo were beginning to show. A suspension bridge, barely wide enough to pass an ox cart, extended from the Texas to the Mexican side, acrawl with pedestrians.

Since this was an official Port of Entry, the governments of the United States and the republic of Mexico maintained Customs and Immigration offices at their respective ends of the bridge.

The smokes of many supper fires lifted in blue-white layers above the tile and *brea* roofs of the twin towns, clouds which joined the roiling, sucking vapor at the foot of the rapids.

The Escalera jail was solidly constructed of rock and was perched on the upper slope of the town. After the interrogation which went with his booking, Hatfield had been locked up, the handcuffs removed, and then Willowby had left with a mumbled comment about getting Ramona's story about this business.

This, Hatfield was thinking moodily, was the hour when he should have been having his rendezvous with Border Patrolman Chestwick and millionaire Selwin Ogden. But Chestwick, murdered under mysterious circumstances, was on an embalmer's table at the county morgue and Ogden was still nothing but a name.

Thus far he had not had an opportunity to dispatch a coded telegraph message to Roaring Bill McDowell in Austin, to acquaint his headquarters with the fact of Chestwick's death and to request permission to identify himself.

Political intrigues were complex and dangerous on the Texas border. For all Hatfield knew, Sheriff Willowby might be working in collusion with *contrabandistas* across the river. If he knew his prisoner was a Texas Ranger, sent here at the request of a Border Patrolman who only this day had been murdered, Hatfield might wind up with a bullet in his back, if Willowby was crooked. Prisoners were frequently shot down while "attempting to escape."

Nate Willowby wasn't too competent as a peace officer. He had searched Hatfield upon jailing him, but had failed to discover the silver star in a silver circle, engraved simply TEXAS RANGER, which he kept concealed in a secret compartment in the lining of one of his cowboots, whenever he was working undercover.

On the narrow street below his cell window, a motley crowd was beginning to collect—cowhands and gamblers, fancy women from the town's honkytonks and deadfalls, storekeepers and bartenders, a sprinkling of Mexicans and Indians.

The throng was not merely a curious one; its glowering silence and the grim set of its collective faces was enough to put a chill down the Lone Wolf's spine. All those glittering eyes were focussed on his jail cell. That crowd had the look of a lynch mob in the making. Bob Chestwick was a popular figure along the Rio Grande, with both Texans and Mexicans alike. Lynching would be too good for the *cabrone* who had driven an ambush arrow into the Border Patrolman's heart today.

HATFIELD turned away from his barred window, realizing the danger if he were seen from the street below; he could be shot down by some over-zealous friend of Chestwick's. The crowd was small now. It would get bigger, as the news of Chestwick's killing spread. And with the coming of dark, if the mob had a leader, it would move on Willowby's calaboose. He wondered if Willowby was the type of sheriff who would defend an accused prisoner from the wrath of a hanging-bee throng.

Having had to walk the three miles from the tules where Chestwick's body had been found, Hatfield's feet were tor-

turing him. His request for a bowl of hot water and a bottle of liniment had, so far, gone unanswered. Nor had any jailer appeared with a supper tray.

The sudden grating of a key in the lock of the bullpen door upstairs, followed by a clumping of footsteps on the narrow steps leading down to the cellblock, made Hatfield start. He saw the sheriff's chap-clad legs appear in the stairwell, followed by a woman's slim, tapering ankles and a rustling print skirt of gay-colored gingham. A waitress from a nearby hash house, probably, bringing the prisoner his last meal before the lynch mob out there broke in.

But it was not a waitress; it was Ramona Chestwick. She had changed to the formfitting housedress which gave her a slim silhouette. Her glossy red-gold hair was burnished and glowing, even in the subdued light of sundown which filtered into the cellblock.

Ramona's eyes were swollen from weeping, but were dry now. There was a rigid set to her lips, a frozen fixture of a bereaved woman with no more tears left to shed, as she followed the thick-necked Texas sheriff over to the locked door of Hatfield's cell. Her arm wound. Hatfield noticed, wore a neat new bandage.

"The young lady has asked to see you, stranger," Willowby said gruffly. "She's changed her story about you wanting to kill her, says you saved her life at the top of the Stairway rapids."

Hatfield came to his feet, a vast load off his mind. The mob on the street below the jailhouse was beginning to make ugly sounds now, reminding him of a wolfpack baying a long way off. A hard-flung rock clattered off the stone wall of the cell and rattled off down the masonry slope to the street.

"I'd like a couple minutes to talk alone with Miss Chestwick, sheriff, if you don't mind."

The girl regarded him dully through the bars.

"I came down here to ask you—why? Why did you kill my father?"

Hatfield said with a calm which belied his inner desperation, "If the sheriff will step out for a few moments, I can explain a lot of things, Ramona."

"How did you know my name? You called me by name right after you fished me out of the river."

"That is one of the things I can explain—how I happened to know your name. But I will not talk in Willowby's presence."

The girl turned to the sheriff. Willowby shrugged.

"O.K.," he said grudgingly. "Just make sure you don't get within arm's reach of his cell, Ramona. I'll give you two minutes, no more."

The lawman left the cellblock and trudged upstairs to his office. Ramona Chestwick said dully, "All right, he's gone. What can you say to me that you couldn't have said around Nate?"

Hatfield's knuckles whitened as he gripped the jail bars.

"You asked me how I happened to know your name," he said, and went on to describe his discovery of the Mexican ambusher drawing a bead on her back from the rimrock, his shooting the Mexican in self defense and, later, his encounter with the withered Mexican crone of the zebra-striped serape, following his rescue of the girl.

"Which brings us," Ramona said when he had finished, "to your riding up-canyon to where my father was—was hiding in line of duty. Shooting him with an Aztec arrow, to make it appear to have some connection with that Montezuma ruby nonsense—"

Her reference to the prehistoric Aztec emperor made no sense to him. Hatfield decided the moment had come to play his ace. "I did not murder your father, Ramona. I am a Texas Ranger. Your father sent for me to help him."

The girl's head jerked up. The indifference left her face as she saw the handsome young rider reach down to pick up one of the cowboots he had removed to relieve his aching feet, and from the lining thereof remove a circle-enclosed

silver star—the most honored emblem in the Lone Star State, a Ranger badge.

"You—your name—would you be—"

Hatfield cut in quickly: "Let me tell you, Ramona, before you give me any clue. My name is Jim Hatfield."

The words seemed to stun Ramona. Tears glistened in her eyes and she came toward him, hesitatingly. Then, as if suddenly realizing he might be tricking her with a dead man's Ranger badge, she stepped back, out of range of his hands.

"I—must have one more proof of your identity," she whispered tautly. "If—you can tell me the name of one other person—working on the case—"

Hatfield scowled. "My telegraphic orders from Captain McDowell prohibited me from revealing my identity to anyone but your father, Ramona. But when I discovered that the dead man I found in those tules was Bob Chestwick—"

SOMETHING in the girl's face, in the bitter fixture of her bloodless lips, caused him to break off.

"You're *not* Jim Hatfield, then," she whispered. "I saw a copy of the telegram Captain McDowell sent Hatfield. It *did* mention another name."

Relief flooded through the Lone Wolf in sweet waves.

"Oh, now I remember. Selwin Ogden, the millionaire. He leaves Escalera tomorrow for an extended trip abroad. That's why I had a deadline to meet, Ramona—your father wanted me here before Ogden left. That's why I was up-canyon, coming out of the brasada short cut, when I saw you about to be ambushed by—"

"Time's up," Willouwby said curtly. "I want you out of here, Ramona, before that mob starts getting ugly. They want this stranger's scalp and if I wasn't such a fool for sticking by my duty, I'd let 'em take him out and string him up for killing your Dad."

A flashing smile crossed Ramona's face, a smile which, under the circumstances, the sheriff could not fathom.

"He didn't kill Daddy, Nate. This is Jim Hatfield."

Willowby halted in his tracks, his jaw sagging.

"The Ranger Bob was expecting to show up tonight? I don't—"

Ramona nodded.

"The same. He's convinced me beyond doubt, Nate. He knows about Selwin Ogden. And Jim Hatfield is the type of man who would risk his own life to save me as he did up the river this afternoon."

Nate Willowby waggled his head slowly from side to side, his manner relenting but his eyes still coldly skeptical.

"We—got to be damned sure he *is* the Lone Wolf, Ramona." Willowby said. "And I know how we can find out, too. Wait and see."

Willowby crossed over to stand facing his prisoner through the bars. His face was still as rigidly hostile as ever.

"If you're Hatfield, you'll have the answer to this question that Captain McDowell sent us by coded wire from Austin last week, stranger," Willowby said. "Seeing as how Bob Chestwick didn't know you by sight, and seeing as how Rangers don't go around advertising who they are when they're working on an undercover case, Ranger Headquarters arranged for a secret way of finding out for sure you're Jim Hatfield and not an imposter. Any idea what I'm talking about?"

RAMONA was tense and anxious as she waited for the prisoner to speak.

"Such passwords work both ways—for my protection as well as yours, sheriff," Hatfield said. "You are going to ask me to describe the paper weight I gave Captain McDowell for Christmas two years ago, the one he keeps on his desk in Austin."

Nate Willowby's eyes lighted up. He reached for the ring of keys hanging from his belt.

"You're half way out of jail right now, son. Keep talking."

Hatfield sat down on the cell cot and started pulling on his boots. "The paper weight is a map of Texas about six inches

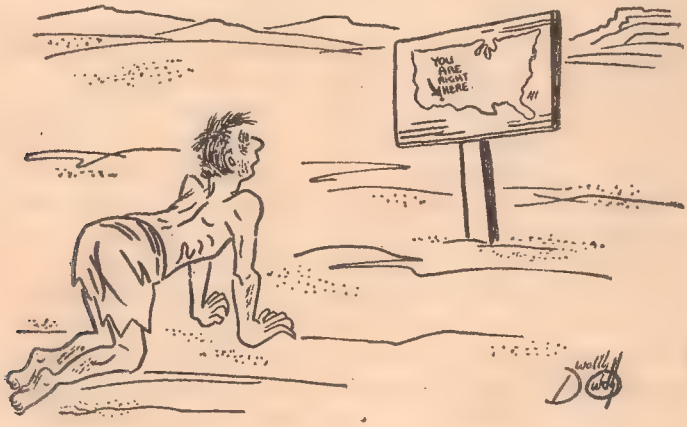
square, made of lead from musketballs picked up from the Jacinto battlefield."

Willowby unlocked the cell door. Before he could enter, Ramona Chestwick slipped past him, threw her arms around the big Ranger's neck and kissed him.

"That," she said, "is for saving my life today. I wasn't in my right mind when I ran away. But I know what I'm doing now."

Hatfield was taken aback by the lovely girl's kiss, but went back to business.

"You might tell me," Hatfield said, "what happened up there above the Devil's Stairway this afternoon. My curiosity has been gnawing at me worse than—"



"Worse than the hunger that's gnawing at your stomach, eh?" interrupted the sheriff. "You're eating upstairs in my office, Hatfield—if you can be patient another ten, fifteen minutes."

The Ranger gestured toward the cell window, through which could be heard the low, but swelling voices of the gathering mob.

"You'd better take Miss Chestwick with you, get her out of this building," he said gravely. "That crowd has the smell of a hanging bee about it."

Sheriff Nate Willowby shrugged. "They'll break up when I tell them who you are."

"But I can't allow that!" Hatfield said sharply. "I mean I came down here on an undercover case. Bob Chestwick didn't want the town to know I was a Ranger."

"Then," Willowby said, "I'll merely tell them evidence has come to light to prove you didn't ambush Chestwick. In the meantime, Ramona—while I'm arranging Hatfield's supper and telling that lynch mob to cool off, how about you bringing Selwin Ogden over to the jail office?"

They were heading up the stairs out of the cell block now, the girl's arm linked through Hatfield's. It gave him a warm feeling, knowing she had accepted him as the Ranger her father had sent for to assist him on a case.

"Jim doesn't understand," Ramona said, "that Mr. Ogden is working incognito also, he's hiding out at our house. He's got important engagements across the Atlantic, Jim—which is why you have to see him tonight or not at all. Selwin Ogden has to leave later tonight, as secretly as he came."

They followed Willowby into the sheriff's office. The lawman went straightaway to his wall safe, opened it, and removed Jim Hatfield's matched six-guns and twin cartridge belts, which he had stored there a few hours previously.

"We'll be back shortly," the sheriff reassured Hatfield, "with Mr. Ogden, and

with your supper."

The Lone Wolf grinned bleakly. "I don't know which," he said, "I'm looking forward to the most."

CHAPTER VI

Millionaire's Secret

HATFIELD was finished with the beefsteak supper Willowby brought him from a nearby restaurant before Ramona Chestwick returned with the tall, rangy gentleman who was probably the most fabulous figure the Texas financial world had ever known.

"Selwin Ogden," the girl said, "allow me to introduce Jim Hatfield, the Texas Ranger Daddy sent for. Jim, I know you've heard too much of Mr. Ogden for me to tell you how important he is."

Over a handshake, the two oddly-similar men, physically speaking, appraised each other as equal to equal. In Jim Hatfield, Ogden was seeing a lawman whose name was already a legend to him. In Selwin Ogden, Hatfield was having his mental picture of typical millionaires changed very drastically.

He had visualized Ogden as a silk-hatted, pot-bellied man with diamonds flashing from his cravat and finger rings, smoking two-dollar cigars, his face bloated with good living. Instead, Ogden turned out to be a rugged athletic type, not quite as weather-browned as Hatfield, but as whip-lean and well conditioned, showing no signs of playboy dissipation.

"I want to apologize for having acted so mysteriously since my arrival in Escalera," Ogden said when the formalities had been dispensed with and the four of them were seated comfortably around the sheriff's desk. "And your father's untimely death in line of duty today, Ramona, distresses me far more than I can express to you."

Hatfield saw a sad expression cross Ramona's eyes. He saw something else which the sheriff, probably, did not notice at all: the way Ramona Chestwick had maneuvered her chair close to Selwin Ogden's the way her eyes clung to the young multi-millionaire's clean-chiseled face.

"Whatever your secret reason for coming here, Mr. Ogden—and Dad never revealed that secret, even to me—I'm sure you and Ranger Hatfield can carry on for Dad," Ramona said huskily. "If—if the two of you would rather be alone—"

Ogden shook his head. "Not at all. Mr. Willowby, as the sheriff of this county, enjoyed Inspector Chestwick's full confidence. The only reason I did not explain why I was visiting Escalera incognito, Sheriff Willowby, was because my coming has an international significance, shall we say. A case for the federal border authorities, rather than a local lawman."

Willowby, touching a match to a cheroot, spoke through the clouding tobacco smoke: "If I was going to get jealous, Mr. Ogden, it'd be about Bob Chestwick wanting a Texas Ranger called in to help him, instead of me."

Jim Hatfield could restrain himself no longer. "I understand your time is pretty limited, sir," he addressed the millionaire. "It so happens that I'm completely in the dark about this case. My own headquarters told me to report to Inspector Chestwick not later than tonight, and that the case was a 'million-dollar' one, as he phrased it. And that you would give us the details."

"I can only tell you what I reported to Ramona's father, as chief of the Border Patrol for this segment of the border," Ogden said. "Before I begin, however, perhaps the sheriff will be good enough to bring me the package I deposited in his safe when I arrived here."

While Willowby was fumbling with the combination of his vault, Hatfield said to Ramona, "Would you mind explaining what you were doing with that telescope this afternoon, Ramona? It was trained on that bed of tules up-river, I found out, and that was why I happened to stumble across your father's body."

Ramona swallowed hard. "I—was spying on Dad," she confessed. "From a distance, because I knew that Dad had been hiding out in the chaparral above that bed of tules for the past several nights, waiting for something to happen, or somebody to show up. I was determined to find out what was going on."

Hatfield said, "Your father didn't tell you what he expected to see happen at that point on the river?"

"No. But I'm pretty sure he was expecting smugglers to show up there. Not from the Mexican side of the river—the current is too swift there for a swimmer or a boat to get across." She shuddered, remembering her own desperate experience in the Rio Grande's clutches. "But I—I was scared. I was afraid Dad might be attacked, or something. So I hid myself in the rocks early this morning, with Dad's telescope. Just in case anything happened, I thought maybe I could help."

Jim Hatfield leaned forward, tense with interest. "Did you know your father was in those tules?"

"Yes. A few minutes before the shooting started from those ambushers, I saw Dad merge from the chaparral and burrow his way into the tules where you found him."

Hatfield's thoughts raced on ahead of the girl's narrative. It was while his own shootout with the Mexican drygulchers was taking place, perhaps, that Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick had been cut down by an Aztec arrow in the heart of that tule bed.

"Do you have any idea who was getting set to ambush you when I showed up from the rimrock brasada, Ramona?"

The girl shook her head. "I—went over to the coroner's morgue with Sheriff Willowby and Mayor Detwiler and had a look at—the Mexican you shot off the cliff. I'd never laid eyes on him before. I don't know how he knew my name."

"And the old crone with the zebra-striped serape that I told Willowby and the mayor about, coming in with your father's body, do you know her?"

Again the girl shook her head negatively. "She could have been any one of a score of old Mexican women on this side of the river, or one of a hundred Chihuahua crones over on the Villa Diablo side of the bridge."

THE sheriff rejoined their circle now, handing Selwin Ogden a small pasteboard box. All three of them pulled their chairs in closer as the millionaire opened the box to reveal a purple velvet cube an inch square, which hinged in the center to reveal a white satin lining. Nested in the satin cushion of the box was a vivid red globe a half-inch in diameter.

"This gem," Selwin Ogden said, lifting the red globe so that the pale rays of the ceiling lamp splintered dazzingly from it, "is one of the most precious stones in the world. A ruby without flaw, even more valuable than a blue-white diamond. Not only for its intrinsic market value—this could be cut up into brilliants which would sell for over $250,000 on the current market—but because of the fact that this is one of eight rubies set in a fabulous necklace worn by Montezuma, king of the Aztects, when Cortez and his Spanish legions conquered Mexico in 1520."

Returning the ruby to its box, Ogden handed it to Jim Hatfield, who, after gingerly inspecting the priceless bauble, passed it along to Ramona for her examination.

"In order to understand my reason for bringing this fantastic jewel to Escalera," Selwin Ogden continued, "I should perhaps sketch its history for you, or the legends surrounding it.

"As you know, King Montezuma was taken captive by Cortez while the Aztec warriors were laying siege to the Spaniards' headquarters in Tenochtitlan. Cortez had pretty well looted Mexico, but he dared not touch the most fabulous personal treasure of them all—the magnificent ruby neeklace, set in gold, copper and silver, which the king wore as a mark of divinity. The rubies were supposed to be solidified drops of blood from the veins of the Aztecan god known as

the Feathered Serpent, and any infidel who attempted to steal them would be under a curse.

"Cortez," Selwin Ogden explained, "forced King Montezuma to stand on the palace wall and exhort the Aztec mob to surrender to the bearded invaders. A flurry of stones struck down Montezuma and killed him. According to the legend which still persists in Mexico to this day, an Aztec sorceress, by the name of Ozara, stepped out of a thundercloud, removed the necklace from the dead Montezuma's neck, plucked the eight ruby globes from their settings, and hurled the necklace at Cortez's feet as a gift for him to take back to the King of Spain, Charles V. But not until the rubies were returned to the necklace, Ozara declared, would Mexico be free of Spanish tyranny—or Cortez free of an Aztec curse. Whereupon Ozara returned to her thundercloud and with a flash of lightning, vanished."

There was an utter silence following Ogden's narrative, the silence small children, in their utter faith, would accord the skillful teller of a fairy tale.

Finally Ramona asked, "What did Cortez do with the necklace?"

Ogden smiled ruefully. "Legend—mark you, I do not say history, which is different than legend—has it that Cortez presented the Montezuma necklace to the King of Spain, along with other loot. The necklace, fitted out with artificial rubies, reposed in a nobleman's palace near Madrid until two years ago, when I purchased it—glass rubies and all—for $50,000. It is now in my private museum in Austin."

Jim Hatfield had been silent during Ogden's recital. He knew this wealthy man had jewel collecting as a hobby, and was considered an absolute authority on gems and antiques in general.

"This ruby is one of the imitations from Montezuma's necklace?" he asked.

Sheriff Willowby commented softly from the background, "You heard Ogden say it was worth a quarter million."

Ogden held the ruby up between thumb and forefinger, as gently as a scientist might hold a butterfly by the wing.

"This stone," he said, "is genuine. In all the world there has never been one like it. A perfect sphere, cutting a ruby into such shape is a lost art, an art supposedly known only to the Aztecs. Rubies are cut along lines of cleavage, like diamonds—and not carved into perfect globes."

Ogden looked up, his eyes sweeping his rapt audience.

"I am convinced beyond all doubt," he said, "that this is one of the original Snake Blood stones from the necklace which that Aztecan sorceress removed from the dead body of Emperor Montezuma over three and a half centuries ago."

A vague disappointment stirred the Lone Wolf Ranger. Was this the "million dollar case" the Border Patrol was working on—a case based on a jewel out of a fairy story?"

Sheriff Willowby voiced what Hatfield was too courteous to put into words: "Ogden, you aren't sitting there and trying to tell us that ruby come from a witch who vanished in a thunderbolt, are you?"

THE MILLIONAIRE jewel collector shrugged. From an inner pocket of his coat he removed an expensive sealskin wallet, from which he took a small sheet of folded paper.

"I know that this ruby was mailed by ordinary parcel post from right here in Escalera one month ago," Ogden said, "to my office in Houston. I have had it appraised by experts. They agree it is a real ruby, worth hundreds of thousands. As for the ruby having been Montezuma's —*quien sabe?* The important thing is, if it is a Mexican ruby, it was smuggled into this country without payment of duty. That is why I got in touch with the Border Patrol as soon as I read this note which accompanied the ruby. That is why Inspector Chestwick requested me to come to Escalera, because, he informed me, he had been working for months investigating a jewel-smuggling ring operating along the Rio Grande. This

letter, Mr. Hatfield, has been seen only by myself and Ramona's father."

Hatfield took the letter from the millionaire's hand and read it aloud for the benefit of Ramona and the sheriff:

> Selwin Ogden, President,
> Ogden Enterprises Inc.,
> Houston, Texas.
> Señor Ogden:
> As one of the world's leading collectors of precious stones, I do not have to tell you this ruby is genuine. What will be of more interest to an antique collector like yourself is that it is one of the eight long-lost Snake Blood Rubies from the necklace of Montezuma.
> If you desire to obtain the remaining seven rubies to replace in the necklace you bought in Spain recently, pay a visit to Villa Diablo province of Chihuahua, Mexico, between sunset and moonrise on the night of July 14.
> Ozara the Ageless One will make herself known to you, Señor. When the Snake Blood Rubies are restored to their rightful setting in the Montezuma necklace, the ancient Aztec curse will be lifted forever.
> Ozara

The letter was writen in English, in precise Spencerian script. But the signature was that of a legendary Aztecan sorceress who had practiced her black magic in 1500 A.D.!

"Between sunset and moonrise tonight," Hatfield mused. "So that's why Bob Chestwick gave me such an urgent deadline—he expected to follow up this melodramatic lead."

"That is correct," Ogden said. "With you assisting him."

"Do you put any stock in this letter, Ogden? I mean, do you think the other Snake Blood Rubies exist?"

Ogden said ruefully, "I'd bankrupt myself to find out. That's how important those gems are, Hatfield."

Hatfield strolled over to the window, lost in thought. Then he turned on Ogden and said, "Some human being—no female ghost—wrote that note. And since it was accompanied by a genuine ruby worth a king's ransom, it obviously can't be brushed off as somebody's practical joke. So, Mr. Ogden, what is your next move? Are you going across the river tonight and wait for an Aztec witch to contact you with seven more rubies?"

"Do I look like a fool?" Ogden retorted. "Of course I'm not crossing the river. Don't you recognize that ruby for what it actually is?"

Hatfield said bleakly, "Of course I do. It is the bait for the most daring kidnap-for-ransom plot Texas will ever see. If you tried to locate this Ozara you'd never get back to Texas alive."

CHAPTER VII

Murder in the Morgue

RAMONA paled, her face going chalky white. She clutched Ogden's arm and whispered in a frightened tone, "Then don't go, Selwin! I—I couldn't endure it if anything happened to you."

Hatfield saw the millionaire drop a hand onto Ramona's. Something akin to jealousy stirred within him, an unreasonable anger which he quickly rejected. After all, if Ramona wanted to snag Texas' most eligible bachelor for a husband, it was none of Hatfield's business. That kiss she had given him, it hadn't meant a thing, he told himself.

"Once on Mexican soil," Hatfield said stiffly, "Selwin Ogden would be seized by hoodlums and ransom demands for his safe return would be a hundred times the price of that ruby they used for bait."

Ogden said huskily, "I have no intention of risking my life for those other rubies, Ramona. As Ranger Hatfield just warned me, I would never live to make it back onto Texas soil if I once crossed that bridge to Villa Diablo tonight."

Hatfield said, "And that was what Inspector Chestwick believed, too? That the ruby was bait to lure you across the river?"

"Yes," Ogden replied.

"Did he have any plans that he told you—about this case, I mean?"

Ogden's grip tightened affectionately on Ramona's hand.

"Only that he believed this Ozara was a

jewel smuggler the Border Patrol had been trying ot capture for a good many years—a woman outlaw—and that he believed he knew how she could be caught in her own trap."

Hatfield said quickly, "What did he mean?"

"I don't know. He said it would require the help of another lawman he could trust, a lawman who would be willing to lay his life on the line to capture Ozara. His choice was you, Mr. Hatfield. That's why you're here tonight, of course."

Hatfield was remembering his brush with the wrinkled old crone in the zebra-striped serape, up the river this afternoon. She had the look of a sorceress, an evil witch. Maybe she was the elusive gem smuggler Bob Chestwick was trying to track down.

Before he could speak aagin, Hatfield was interrupted by a sharp rap on the door of the sheriff's office. Selwin Ogden hissed sharply, "Hide me, sheriff, I don't want to be seen here."

"Who is it?" Sheriff Nate Willowby called out, motioning Ogden and the girl to head through the bullpen door into the stairwell.

"Sean Detwiler," came the voice of Escalera's mayor, whom Hatfield had last seen at the undertaker's morgue this evening following their return from upcanyon. "I've got bad news to report, Nate."

Willowby crossed the room, slid back a bolt, twisted a key in a lock and opened the jail's street door. Detwiler stepped in, eyes blinking against the glare of lampshine.

"It's—" He broke off, spotting Jim Hatfield standing with his back against the bullpen door, through which Selwin Ogden and Ramona Crestwick had vanished.

"What's he doing loose, sheriff?"

Willowby said impatiently, "Haven't had a chance to tell you, Mayor—this ain't an owlhooter. It's Jim Hatfield, the Texas Ranger Bob Chestwick had sent for to help him on a case involving contraband runners."

Detwiler was momentarily covered with confusion. Then the politician in him came to the surface and he approached the Lone Wolf with a cautious smile, extending a flabby hand in greeting.

"I've wanted to meet Texas' most famous Ranger as long as you've worn the star, sir!" Detwiler boomed. "I—"

"You had bad news to report," Hatfield cut the mayor short.

Detwiler mopped his florid cheeks with a bandanna. "Yeah," he said, remembering. "It's the coroner, Cy Murdock. He's been murdered, Nate. Stabbed in the back, not half an hour ago, in his workshop where he was embalming Bob's corpse. I dropped in to ask him when the inquest had been set and found him sprawled on the floor, nigh onto breathing his last."

Willowby stalked over to his gun rack and took down a Winchester carbine. Why, Hatfield could not fathom; Murdock's killer had long since fled the scene.

"Did the coroner say anything before he died, Mayor?" Hatfield asked sharply. "Like who knifed him, or anything?"

Detwiler nodded. "Yeah, but he'd never seen her before."

"Her?" Willowby echoed. "You mean a *woman* stabbed Cy?"

"A hag, Cy called her," Detwiler said. "Looked to be Injun or part Negro. Anyway, it was a woman."

Hatfield and the sheriff exchanged glances. The Ranger had his ideas about who the killer had been—the crone in the zebra-striped serape who had tried so hard to gun down he and Ramona up the river canyon this afternoon.

"Was that all Cy told you before he died?" Willowby asked.

"No," Detwiler said, with the smug way of a story teller with a captive audience, milking the last ounce of suspense out of his narrative. "He said this hag come into his workshop without him hearing her, while he was working on Bob Chestwick's remains. She covered him with a gun, Cy said, and forced him

to open the safe and turn over that Aztec arrow Hatfield had tied to his saddle. That was all he could tell me. He just started coughing and that was the end."

WILLOWBY headed for the door, saying gruffly to Hatfield: "Come along, Ranger. One thing about a murder in the morgue, we won't have to lug the body anywhere. No chance of tracking down the woman who did it, I reckon, but we can try."

The Lone Wolf crossed the office and stepped out into the night behind Willowby and the Mayor. He hoped Ramona hadn't overheard the mayor's grisly story about what had happened over in the morgue where the body of her father lay awaiting autopsy.

Hatfield overtook Detwiler and the sheriff and fell in step with them, letting them guide him through the stygian darkness. The street was very narrow, very dark, and very crooked; Escalera was built on a series of artificial terraces hanging under the Texas cliffs, and the only lights were down on Riverfront Street where the saloons and honkies were.

These shadows were made for evil to flourish in; somewhere in their depths, the killer of Cy Murdock could be lurking, could even be watching them pass by.

They walked along in stony silence, only the ring of their steps on cobblestone paving breaking the eerie echoes. They passed a livery doorway, identified in the darkness by the ammoniac reek of a stable, and Hatfield knew where he was in relation to the morgue—this was the barn where he had left Goldy, on his way to jail.

Without being aware that he did so, Jim Hatfield voiced his thoughts out loud: "If that hag who killed the coroner stole the ambush arrow out of Bob Chestwick's body, it's the fatal mistake that every criminal makes sooner or later. It's the mistake that'll put a hangrope around Ozara's neck."

Ahead of them an open doorway spilled a fanwise glare of lamplight onto the street. The sheriff glanced over his shoulder at Hatfield and asked curiously, "How's that again, Ranger?"

"Nothing," Hatfield said. "Just that that arrow in Bob Chestwick's body had better still be there. It was to be removed only in the presence of a coroner's jury, by a qualified autopsy surgeon."

The lamplighted doorway proved to be the rear entrance to the county morgue. Entering it, the three men found themselves in the same room where they had delivered the two dead bodies a few hours before.

The corpse of Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick, shrouded under a sheet, still reposed on a stone-topped table directly under the coroner's ceiling lamp. In the shadowy background was another dead body—the Mexican pelado—similarly covered. Sprawled on the floor between the two slabs was the body of Escalera's undertaker, Cyrus Murdock.

As Detwiler had reported, Murdock had been stabbed in the chest and left for dead—and he *was* dead now. As mayor

A small TEXAS TALE

THE BIG IDEA

BACK in the old days of Texas, wild stories made the rounds about man-eating monsters that prowled the plains west of the Pecos.

One day at dusk, when shadows lay deep across the sands, two cowboys came across some huge footprints. They were long, wide, and clawed, looking like those of no known creature.

For long moments, the punchers studied the prints silently and solemnly. Then one of them said, "Ed, you ride on ahead and see where this varmint went. I'll ride back and see where he come from."

—Jack Kytle

and sheriff knelt beside the body of their friend, Hatfield passed on by them, going over to the door leading into the coroner's office.

Opening it, he let lamplight fall into the room, against the black iron door of the county coroner's safety vault. He had seen Murdock deposit the Aztec arrow which he, Hatfield, had originally found clutched in Chestwick's dead hand, in that safe.

It came as no surprise to Hatfield to find the safe door unlocked. The arrow was no longer reposing on the shelf where the coroner had placed it, as official evidence in a murder case.

Going back into the morgue room, Hatfield walked over to Chestwick's body and lifted the sheet back to expose the head and chest of Ramona's father.

The ambush arrow was gone. No autopsy surgeon's scalpel had removed that murder weapon; the arrow wound was now mutilated, showing where the arrow had been forcibly jerked from the dead man's flesh.

Hatfield reverently replaced the sheet over the corpse. He glanced up to see the sheriff and Detwiler staring at him.

"Now why in tunket," Willowby was asking, "would a killer run such a risk to get back an Injun arrow? Afraid it might be traced back to its owner or something?"

Hatfield smiled cryptically. "You may be closer to the answer than you know," he said. "This sounds crazy loco, maybe, but I think Bob Chestwick's death from an Aztec arrow goes back to the original curse that sorceress put on Montezuma's necklace, sheriff."

Without explaining himself, the Texas Ranger headed back toward the street door, ignoring the sprawled body of the coroner. At the threshold he halted, arrested by Willowby's cry: "Where are you going, Jim? Aren't you going to help me try and track down Murdock's killer?"

Hatfield said, "Start hunting clues, sheriff. I work my way, you work yours. I'm going to track down a personal hunch. If it pays off, you'll have your killer by tomorrow noon." Hatfield then vanished from the doorway.

Detwiler glanced at the sheriff. "Now," said the mayor, "you know why they call him the Lone Wolf. He doesn't like to work with other officers."

FIVE minutes later Jim Hatfield was back at the sheriff's office. He opened the bullpen door and let the light flood into the stairwell, surprising millionaire Ogden and Ramona Chestwick locked in a passionate embrace just inside the doorway.

"I should have knocked," Hatfield said wryly. "I hope you'll forgive me. Ogden, I've got to have a pow-wow with you. With your help, I think I can solve the mystery of Bob Chestwick's murder and crack the very case he was working on when you entered the picture."

The blushing young couple did not appear to have heard a word Hatfield said. Emerging into the glare of the sheriff's office, Selwin Ogden said boyishly, "Congratulate me, Hatfield. I may not leave Escalera with the Snake Blood Rubies, but I'll take a treasure worth a million times as much."

"You're the first to know," Ramona Chestwick said shyly.

Ogden looked fondly into the eyes of the girl, and said, "We're going to be married at the Spanish Mission right here in Escalera, Jim—tomorrow. We'd like you to be the best man."

Regretfully, the Lone Wolf silenced the happy lovers. "I'll save my congratulations for later," he said. "Right now I want to know, Ogden, whether anyone knows you by sight over in Villa Diablo—anyone at all? Think carefully. It's extremely important."

Selwin Ogden came back to earth with a grimace. "Why should I know anyone in that filthy place? I came here very much incognito, Hatfield. I don't mean to boast, but a man in my position, unless he travels with a veritable army of bodyguards, can't let his true identity be known, especially in a backwoods place like Escalera."

Hatfield nodded in agreement. "*Bueno.* The reason this ruby was mailed to you, to lure you into crossing the river, was because you purchased Montezuma's necklace. That's the pretext. The real reason is to kidnap you for ransom. Agreed?"

Selwin Ogden nodded.

"You are supposed to be in Villa Diablo, across the river from here, before monrise tonight, if you are going to contact this Ozara about the Snake Blood rubies. The moon—" Hatfield glanced at the big almanac calendar which shared the wall above Willowby's desk with a collection of reward posters—"will rise at one-ten this morning. It is now ten forty-five. You don't have much time to waste, keeping that appointment."

The color faded from Ogden's cheeks. "What the hell are you hinting at, Hatfield? I'm not crossing that river. Not for a bucket full of rubies. Not for Ozara's golden image, crusted with diamonds. No sir. It would be suicide."

Hatfield said, "Ogden, you and I are the same size. Do you have a change of clothing with you?"

Selwin Ogden nodded, puzzlement in his eyes now. "I have extra clothes, of course, at Ramona's. But what are you driving at?"

Ramona stepped forward, terror in her eyes. She had caught on.

"No, Jim—you can't."

"Can't what?" Ogden demanded testily. "What's the secret between you two, anyhow?"

The Lone Wolf said, "I'm keeping your rendezvous with that Aztec sorceress in Villa Diablo tonight—disguised as Selwin Ogden."

Ramona turned imploring to Selwin Ogden. "Don't let him throw his life away, Selwin!" Ramona pleaded. "Even if his scheme worked and he found out who was smuggling those rubies out of Mexico, he'd never get back alive."

Ogden hesitated. "Well," he said, "Hatfield's a lawman. But you're right. I can't let him risk his life just because he has more courage than common sense, in this instance. No, Jim I will not furnish you with a costume to disguise yourself."

The Lone Wolf's jarring, bitter laugh made the millionaire gem collector break off. Hatfield said, "Then I'll commandeer your duds and wear them anyway, Ogden." His glance slid over to Ramona. "Because whoever contacts me in Villa Diablo is responsible for murdering your father with that arrow today, Ramona. And I intend to bring them to justice for that ambush."

CHAPTER VIII

The Snake Blood Rubies

IN ALL his years behind a star, Jim Hatfield had never decked himself out in a disguise that made him resemble his true self less—or humiliate his dignity more—than the one he wore now. Hatfield entered the guardhouse office of the U. S. Customs Service at the Texas entrance to the Rio Grande bridge.

In place of a Stetson he was wearing a foppish silk topper, intended for New York's Park Avenue instead of a remote Texas settlement. A clawhammer coat of tailored black fustian stuff set off his wide shoulders and wedge-shaped torso to as much advantage as the millionaire it had been cut to fit. In lieu of waist overalls and bullhide chaps, Hatfield's slim, saddle-warped legs were encased in striped marsailles trousers which bore the label of a London tailor. Highly polished patent leather oxfords replaced the usual Coffeyville cowboots Hatfield had worn for years. A gold watch chain looped across an ornate bed-of-flowers waistcoat. His shirt was linen, his cravat black satin, with an astonishingly large diamond horseshoe stickpin glittering there.

The Customs officer on duty was leafing through papers which Hatfield had handed him.

"Your credentials seem quite in order, Mr. Ogden," the official said. "Your tem-

porary visitor's permit is good for thirty days in lieu of a visa. I suggest you come back in the morning, sir, and—"

Hatfield said, "I was told the international bridge was open to pedestrian traffic across the river until twelve midnight, young man."

The customs guard nodded. "That is true, sir. Gambling is very popular on both sides of the river, and while wheeled vehicles are not permitted to cross the bridge from either direction from sunset to sunrise, the gates for pedestrians remain open until twelve midnight. We sound a curfew bell."

Hatfield accepted the credentials which had identified him as one Selwin Ogden of Houston and stowed them away in the inner pocket of the steelpen coat.

"Then I'll stroll over to the Chihuahua side of the river now. These dirty little Mexican hamlets look far more romantic —and antiseptic—by starlight than in the broad light of day."

The border guard coughed apologetically. "Beg pardon, Mr. Ogden, but what I'm trying to say is this—Villa Diablo is not a safe place for the average American tourist, let alone a man of your reputation for wealth."

The fake Selwin Ogden said patronizingly, "Why. I'm only carrying a trifling five hundred in my wallet tonight, sir. If some footpad across the river holds me up for that sum, he is welcome to it."

The guard protested, "Men have been cut from ear to ear for five cents, Mr. Ogden, let alone five hundred dollars. Be sensible! If you were drunk I'd detain you, but you—"

"I am stone sober, I assure you," Hatfield said, interupting. "Tush, tush. Open the turnstile. If your midnight curfew catches me out sightseeing, why, I'll be able to weather one night in a Mexican *posada,* I imagine."

Still shaking his head apprehensively, the customs guard escorted Hatfield out to a turnstile which he unlocked to permit this over-dressed tourist onto the suspension bridge deck.

"You should at least carry a weapon when you go slumming in Villa Diablo," the guard made one last feeble attempt to persuade this tourist against his suicidal folly. "Frankly, I expect to list you as a missing person tomorrow, Mr. Ogden."

Hatfield set off at a jaunty gait. Behind him, a withered Mexican *lavendera,* or washerwoman, presented a pass to the flustered guard and, bent down under a load of laundry picked up from Texas customers, started plodding along behind Hatfield.

The music of melodeons in the Texas saloons was beginning to blend with the guitars of Old Mexico as Hatfield reached mid-river. Getting here had not been without its difficulties; Selwin Ogden had protested loudly about a Ranger carrying the prerogatives of his office too far, preempting a citizen's private property; but in the end Ogden had consented to turning over his personal identification papers and wallet—from which he had, at Hatfield's suggestion, removed a thick sheaf of yellow-backed currency. They had agreed, however, that Hatfield should wear the diamond horseshoe for his cravat, because it was almost a trademark with Ogden when in dress clothes.

Hatfield had changed into his disguise at the Chestwick home. A brief conference with Sheriff Nate Willowby, who dropped in to report that the coroner's murderer had left no clues whatever at the morgue, and Hatfield had headed alone through Escalera's shadowy streets to the Port of Entry gates.

Reaching the Mexican side of the river, Hatfield had to show his credentials once more, together with the temporary visitor's permit which the American guard had issued him. Once more the border officials, sizing up this flashly-dressed man for a *rico Americano,* voiced a solemn warning:

"Thees town, Señor, ees not the place for you to walk alone weethout the gun or even the walking steek. Villa Diablo ees not safe at night."

Jim Hatfield brushed the nap of his silk hat against the fabric of his sleeve, as he had seen society dandies do.

"I am quite able to take care of myself, thank you," he said in flawless Spanish, and walked off the bridge ramp to find himself at the foot of Villa Diablo's cobblestoned Calle Principale, or main street.

BEHIND him, the lights of the Texas saloons lay on the Rio Grande's turgid surface like yellow pickets of a reflected fence. The thunder of the Devil's Stairway rapids was an ever-present monotone which a visitor's ears, in time, seemed to shut out of their own accord.

Here on the Mexican side of the river, a man stepped back in time a couple of hundred years, it seemed. The night throbbed to the sound of Spanish guitars being strummed in far alleys, where lovers serenaded their *damoselas* on overhead balconies. The stars seemed lower and more luminous than over on the Texas side of the Rio Grande, somehow. Their light made the sordid mud hovels look exotic, gleaming on whitewashed 'dobe plaster.

The fandango houses, the monte parlors, the Mexican *ramerias* with their scantily-dressed girls leaning from second-story balconies—all these establishments were crowded with customers, many of them gringos from across the river.

Jim Hatfield had traveled less than fifty feet from the bridge when he found himself in the center of a swarm of barefooted urchins who, even at this late hour, were roving the streets like packs of wild dogs.

He tossed a handful of coins to one side, hoping to be rid of the juvenile beggars, but his respite was a short one. Instead of being satisfied with their bribe, the shrill shouts of the children brought fresh hordes scurrying from alley mouths and dark doorways.

Cries of *"Rico gringo!" "El simplon Tejano!"* rent the air. Hatfield probed his pockets for more change; he had made a mistake not anticipating these gangs of beggars who lay in wait for Americans with money to spend.

And then he caught sight of the ancient Mexican laundry woman who had followed him across the bridge. She was be-

"I should have known better than to trust a dude to shoe my horse!"

laboring the shrieking *muchachos* with her cane, screeching maledictions in her Chihuahuan patois.

Whoever she was, the washerwoman with her bundle was a familiar and dreaded figure to Villa Diablo's small fry; they scattered before the blows of her cane like quail startled by a hunting dog, leaving the cobblestoned plaza to Hatfield and the crone.

"My thanks, madre," Hatfield said in Spanish, accompanied by a courtly bow. "In return for the favor, may I carry your bundle of laundry to your casa?"

The old woman drew back, shifting the weight of the bundle on her scrawny shoulders.

"You are el Señor Ogden from Houston," the crone said in a lisped undertone. "I heard you give your name to the guard at the American gate."

Hatfield nodded, his heart beginning to pound. He had expected to be approached by someone shortly after setting foot on Mexican soil tonight, but hardly by the woman he believed to be the mysterious "Ozara" herself.

"And you," the Lone Wolf retorted, "are no *lavendera*, no humble washerwoman. Your bundle does not contain dirty clothes. Am I right?"

The crone thrust a scraggy paw under the bosom of her nondescript burlap dress. When the hand was withdrawn, the light of a nearby cantina window glinted on the stubby barrel of a pistol.

"And what," the Mexican woman asked in English, "does my parcel contain, Señor Ogden?"

Hatfield thought, this is the big test. Either I smash this case in the next thirty seconds or I'm a dead man. Aloud, he said quietly, "*Quien sabe*, Señora? I have spent the last three days and nights in the *casa* of Señor Chestwick. I picked up considerable gossip by keeping my eyes and ears open. I think I can guess what is in your parcel, among other things."

The laundress whispered, "I am listening, Señor."

"Well, shall we say two Aztec arrows—one of them jerked from the dead body of my host in the county morgue tonight? And perhaps a man's gaucho costume, complete with a zebra-striped serape, which the Señorita Ramona saw you wearing this morning when you took pot shots at her above the Stairway?"

The woman shifted her bundle to the other shoulder.

"We talk better at my *casita*, Señor. You will follow me?"

Without waiting for Hatfield's reaction, the crone turned her back to him and set off at her hobbling gait toward the mouth of an alley—it was too narrow to deserve the name of "Avenida Azul" on the signpost at its mouth.

Hatfield followed, knowing he was crowding his luck, entering the black gut of this alley at the crone's heels. She probably had a catlike night vision, and was not nearly so decrepit as she pretended to be.

He knew beyond any shadow of a doubt that this woman had posted herself on the Texas side of the river to spy for Selwin Ogden's coming. She was, in all probability, the perpetrator of two murders in the past twelve hours—Bob Chestwick and the county coroner, Murdock. But was she also Ozara, the jewel smuggler who claimed to possess the Snake Blood rubies of Montezuma?

THE SOUND of the tapping cane picked up in tempo, and Hatfield suddenly realized that he had to lengthen his stride to keep up with her. The crone had literally vanished in the blackness ahead; the sable hues of her slatternly dress and the black Spanish shawl draped over her head and shoulders had been chosen for its camouflage value, no doubt.

"My *casita*, Señor," the incredible old woman spoke after they had followed Avenida Azul for three or four twisting, upward-climbing blocks.

Hatfield halted in the darkness. They were in the poorer quarter of Villa Diablo, he knew; the night smells, the scuttle of garbage-foraging rats underfoot, the congestion of the sordid looking jacal huts told him that.

A key grated in a lock; a door opened on protesting hinges, and Hatfield saw a candle-lit room at the foot of a flight of stone stairs. A basement under one of the ancient houses of Villa Diablo.

He hesitated, wishing he had a six-gun, but to have carried one would have been out of character. Selwin Ogden was a man who had courage, but not the courage that demanded a revolver at his hip. Ogden survived by his wits; his wealth was testimonial to that. And, for this hour at least, Jim Hatfield was Selwin Ogden.

He followed the crone down the basement steps, steeling himself against an impulse to look behind him when the door was closed by someone other than the crone.

Ogden was expected tonight, Hatfield thought, as he heard someone slide a bolt into its socket behind his back, and zapato sandals follow him down the stairs.

The low-ceiling basement room was sparsely furnished. There was a pallet covered with blankets in one cornor. The stub of candle burned in a whiskey bottle on a crude deal table in the center of the room; beside the candle was a head of cheese with a triangle-shaped segment cut out of it, a bottle of brandy and a bottle of malaga wine, a sheet of paper and an ink bottle with a quill pen jutting from it.

"A lamp, Pablo," the crone ordered, and Hatfield swung around to see a gorillalike *mozo* following him, a man with the same Mongol cast to his face, the same rat-tail mustaches as the pelado bushwacker he had shot this afternoon on the Rio Grande rimrock.

The old woman dumped her prop bundle of "laundry" on the hard stone floor and seated herself on a rustic chair back of the table, facing Hatfield. Pablo slithered off into the gloom to return moments later with a coal oil lamp, unlighted, which he placed on the table beside the cheese.

His face was horribly scarred by disease pocks. He wore a knife at his belt, Hatfield observed, but no gun. His shirt was unbuttoned and Hatfield noticed a red rose tattoo on his hair chest, similar to the one on the dead Mexican outlaw in Cy Murdock's morgue.

When Pedro had the lamp lighted, he withdrew to the foot of the steps and hunkered down, exactly as a bull ape might have done, his long arms bracketting his legs, his eyes fixed on Hatfield with reptilian intensity.

"*Ahora*," the old woman said briskly, speaking in Spanish, "let me introduce myself. I am Ozara, the blood descendant of the sorceress who was a favorite of Montezuma's court. Up to now I have assumed you are the rich gringo toad Selwin Ogden who has money enough to buy the Montezuma necklace over in Spain. But I must have proof. May I see the *documentos* you presented at the Port of Entry gates tonight, Senor?"

Hatfield handed over Ogden's wallet with its various papers. The woman examined them carefully, her blue-veined, knobby hands like the hands of a mummy. In this eerie lamplight, it would have been easy enough to believe that she was the reincarnation of a centuries-dead Aztec witch.

"Why," the woman demanded, lifting her snake-bright eyes to regard Hatfield, "did you hide out at the casa of Senor Chestwick, the Border Patrol chief? Were you hoping to trap me into the hands of the *yanqui* law when I delivered the seven Snake Blood Rubies, perhaps?"

Hatfield returned her basilisk stare with an effort of will power. "A man as wealthy as I has to be careful," he said. "In a town like Escalera I could not risk living at a hotel, victim for any thug who happened along. I felt safer visiting a lawman. I could just as well have enjoyed the hospitality of sheriff Willowby's roof."

The explanation seemed to satisfy Ozara. She did not return Ogden's wallet, but thrust it aside. Then, folding her hands on the table, she fired a question which, to Hatfield, was loaded with suspense:

"This morning a cowboy rescued Senorita Chestwick from going over the falls. You have talked with Senorita Ramona. Who was that vaquero, Senor Ogden?"

HATFIELD felt the cold clutches of depair grip his vitals. Was Ozara hinting that she had seen through his imposture, knew he was impersonating the millionaire playboy her ruby bait had lured up the Rio Grande tonight?

"She indeed spoke of him," Hatfield said quietly. "A drifter who brought her murdered father to town—and roosted in Willowby's jail charged with Chestwick's murder until the girl absolved him."

A pulse ticked rapidly on Ozara's neck. "Where is that vaquero now?"

Hatfield shrugged. Lamplight flickered on naked steel to one side and he saw Pablo whetting his long-bladed *cuchillo* on the sole of his sandal.

"The sheriff turned him out of jail, I understand," Hatfield said. "That's all I know. But we have come to discuss a matter of money and rubies, have we not? Of what importance is a Texas cowboy who happened to dab his rope on Ramona Chestwick?"

The crone sucked a breath across her toothless gums.

"That vaquero murdered my eldest son Primotivo, Pablo's brother. Senor Ogden, you will remain standing where you are. I will show you the seven Snake Blood Rubies of Montezuma, as a reward for the bravery it took for you to cross the river tonight."

She thrust a hand inside her dress and this time, instead of a pistol, Ozara produced a pliable buckskin sack. From it she spilled seven glowing red balls, like boy's marbles, each a perfect replica of the genuine stone Selwin Ogden had displayed at the sheriff's office earlier tonight.

Hatfield leaned forward eagerly, acting the role of a monied jewelry connoisseur who would have pawned his soul to own these long-missing gems from an Aztec necklace. Actually, he did not know if Ozara's rubies were paste or genuine.

"May I hold them in my hands, Senorita?" he asked, with just the right quiver of excitement in his voice.

For answer, Ozara poured the Snake Blood Rubies back into the pouch, cinched the puckering string with a jerk of her hand, and secreted it under her garment.

"I knew you would be here tonight, Senor Ogden," the woman said. "You wish to know my price for the rubies?"

Hatfield said hoarsely, "I will pay any price you ask, you know that. But not on this side of the river, Senorita."

Ozara appeared startled. She glanced quickly at Pablo, then back to the American.

"I do not comprehend, Senor."

Hatfield said, "I'm a business man, Senorita. I collect gems as a hobby. I intend to have them. But I do not intend to pay the duty on their assessed valuation which the U.S. Customs would collect."

The old woman seemed to relax. She motioned toward the ink bottle.

"I have a *documento* which requires your signature, Senor Ogden. You will sign it. Then we will discuss business."

Hatfield stepped forward and took the quill pen from the ink bottle. The full glare of the oil lamp fell on the sheet of paper which, like a prop in a stage set, had been ready and waiting for the Texas millionaire he was impersonating.

"You Americanos never sign anything without reading it first," Ozara taunted. "Read it, then sign it."

Jim Hatfield's eyes shuttled over the Spencerian writing which matched the note Ozara had mailed to Ogden along with one of the Snake Blood Rubies:

> I am being held prisoner in a secret place south of the border. My ransom is in the amount of two million dollars, payable in gold. My captors will allow you ten days to raise my ransom and place it on deposit at the Cattlemen's Bank in Del Rio. The cashier of this bank will receive instructions as to how to contact my representatives to collect this ransom, and where to meet me on my release.
>
> Since my life is at stake, needless to say you must meet this demand to the letter, without delay. As proof that my signature is not a forgery, I also append the secret combination of my private safety vault in my Houston residence.
>
> (signed)

Hatfield looked up to see Ozara standing with clawlike fingers clutching the side

of the table, a vein ticking wildly on her temple.

"I have to admire you, in a fiendish sort of way you are remarkable, Ozara. So I am your prisoner?"

Ozara snapped waspishly, "Sign the *documento*. And if the combination to the safe is incorrect and negotiations fail at Del Rio, it will win you nothing but death by torture."

Hatfield picked up the quill and scribbled "Selwin Ogden III" across the bottom of the ransom demand, together with a series of meaningless numbers and letters purporting to be a combination. When he had finished, Ozara snatched up the paper, folded it, and ran her talonlike fingernails along the crease.

"I had expected to pay at least a million for Montezuma's rubies," Hatfield mused. "I will confess to being a fool. I might have known I am more valuable as a prisoner than a customer."

Ozara hissed in her monotone, "The Snake Blood Rubies will never leave Mexico, Senor Ogden. And neither will you. The Aztec curse will strike you down as my ancestress prophesied centuries ago."

At a gesture from Ozara, her son Pablo came to his feet, long-bladed knife glinting.

"You are very stupid," Ozara said, "to be so rich—"

CHAPTER IX

Knife and Knuckle

HATFIELD spun on his heel to see Pablo charging him, bawling deep in his throat like the bull gorilla he resembled. The Mexican's right was lifting, lamplight making its fluid arc on the burnished blade of the razor-honed knife Pablo was intending to use as this American's executioner.

In a flash as fast as thought itself, Jim Hatfield sized up the situation and found it following the very pattern he had predicted tonight in the hearing of Ramona and the sheriff. The Snake Blood Rubies, or the promise of them, were the bait intended to entice Ogden into a secret trip across the Rio Grande tonight, into a kidnap web.

The signed paper Senorita Ozara now possessed was, in her estimation, worth two million American dollars, a cheap ransom for a Texan who was worth perhaps ten times two million. Whether the kidnap victim was returned alive upon payment of the ransom mattered nothing.

So Ozara had decreed a quick death for her victim, once his signature was affixed to the ransom note.

The Lone Wolf moved in fast, diving at Pablo's midriff. He was hampered by Ogden's fancy clothing, but his rush had not been expected and his shoulder hit the pit of the Mexican's belly with an impact which drove the wind from his lungs and brought a mighty shout from his throat.

In an instant Hatfield's right fist was sledging the point of Pablo's jaw, giving the Mexican no time to recover himself. Hatfield's left hand lanced out across the pelado's body, to clamp on Pablo's knife hand.

The two men came to their feet locked in a weaving, twisting grapple. Hatfield found himself outweighed by fifty pounds, and Pablo's arms had a gorilla's strength, fending the Texan off, breaking his grip on the Mexican's knife arm.

Across the room, Ozara had danced from behind the table, six-gun in hand, but Hatfield knew she would not shoot except to save Pablo's life. Ozara, engaged in the shady business of extortion as well as smuggling, would hardly welcome a visit from the Mexican rurales, coming to investigate the sound of a gunshot from an Avenida Azul basement.

Hatfield was gambling on that fact as, retreating backwards from Pablo's slashing knife strokes, he called sharply to Ozara:

"Call him off, Ozara, or you get not one peso ransom. Call Pablo off and I can

prove what I say, Senorita. Do you think I am so stupid I would cross into Mexico without an ace in the hole?"

Pablo shrieked a Chihuahuan oath and lunged at Hatfield.

There was a .41 derringer hiding in a spring clip under each of the Lone Wolf's coat sleeves—gamblers equipment which Selwin Ogden had built into his clothing. But Hatfield did not release the hide-out pistols; his words brought a frenzied order from Ozara to her son: "*Bastante*—enough. Pablocito! Let us hear what the gringo has to say!"

Panting heavily, the animal like Pablo lowered his gun arm, thereby saving himself a point blank derringer bullet.

"He is bluffing, he is a mouse afraid to die!" Pablo choked out. "Talk, gringo!"

Disheveled but otherwise unscathed, Jim Hatfield carefully reached thumb and forefinger into the breast pocket of his fustian coat and drew out a paper.

"Tonight before I crossed the bridge," he panted. "I wrote myself a little life insurance policy, Ozara, just in case you tried to double-cross me. This is a carbon copy of a letter I left in the keeping of Sheriff Nate Willowby. A similar letter was mailed to my attorney in Austin."

Hatfield handed the paper to Pablo, who regarded it stupidly for a moment, then turned and carried it over to his mother. The old hag's clawlike fingers shaking with uncontroled anger as she unfolded the paper and read aloud:

To whom it may concern:

I am crossing the river to Villa Diablo in a few minutes, hoping to make a deal to purchase some Aztec jewelry.

The criminals with whom I will be dealing may attempt to hold me for exhorbitant ransom. If so, they would never spare my life in any event, such being the nature of kidnappers.

Therefore, no matter what evidence in my handwriting may turn up requesting that my ransom be paid, ignore it. My estate can assume I am dead and probate my last will and testament accordingly.

Signed,
Selwin Ogden.

Escalera, Tex.,
10:00 PM July 14

Ozara re-read the letter a second time, and Hatfield saw her seem to deflate, like a punctured balloon. She held the paper over the lamp chimney and let it burst into flame, then let the blazing tissue paper flutter to the floor.

"It is no bluff, Pablocito," she told her glowering son. "I made the mistake of underestimating Senor Ogden. There will be no ransom paid." She pulled in a deep breath, then lifted her eyes to meet Hatfield's. "But you still must die, Senor. No one knows whom you intended to visit tonight. You will vanish without trace."

Jim Hatfield said quietly, "There is still the matter of the Snake Blood Rubies. I am prepared to buy them, for the price you demanded for my life, Ozara."

WHILE that proposition was soaking in, Jim Hatfield decided he had toyed with his life long enough. His arms made their sharp whipping up and down motion, and in the next instant the man who was impersonating Selwin Ogden had filled his hands with twin derringers, deadly as his own Colt .45s at close range.

His right-hand pistol covered Pablo. The other derringer was trained on Ozara.

"I could kill you both," Hatfield said, "and take those Snake Blood Rubies from your dead body, Ozara. But I won't. I'll buy them."

Very slowly, Ozara laid her six-gun on the table. At a gesture from her, the thick-witted Pablo tossed his knife into the corner.

"You must be mad, Senor," Ozara whispered. "Why buy rubies you could have for the cost of two bullets?"

Hatfield smiled grimly. "I told you I would not take delivery of the Snake Blood Rubies on this side of the river, Ozara. I would be searched crossing the bridge onto American soil, and my reputation would be ruined forever as a reputable business man. I cannot afford to sacrifice myself by being exposed as a common smuggler."

Ozara licked her puckered lips. "You must want the rubies of Montezuma very, very much, Senor. How much will you

pay for them? Did I understand you to say—two million?"

Hatfield shrugged. "Is two million dollars so much? For Ogden Enterprises, it is a fraction of the annual profit of my fleet of Gulf Coast banana boats. For you, two million dollars is the biggest smuggling haul in the history of the border."

Ozara licked her lips, guile turning her eyes to pinpoints.

"How do we arrange this thing—the transfer of money and rubies—if it cannot take place here in Villa Diablo?"

Hatfield said, "I leave Escalera tomorrow on my way to Europe. If you can deliver the Snake Blood Rubies to me at the Coronado House Hotel by high noon tomorrow, two million dollars in negotiable drafts will be awaiting you. That way the gems will not pass through Customs. I will pay no duty. And the responsibility for smuggling them across the border will be yours, not mine. Is it a deal?"

Ozara said warily, "It does not make sense, you willing to spend so much merely to avoid paying a tax. What guarantee would you have that I would decide to give up the Snake Blood Rubies at all?"

Hatfield smiled. "My guarantee is your greed, Senorita. You want gringo gold. I want Montezuma's rubies, without committing any direct crime, without risking going to a penitentiary for ten years for attempting to defraud the government. It's that simple."

Ozara seemed to come to a decision. "You will have your rubies by noon tomorrow. I myself will visit the Coronado House with a bundle of laundry—"

Hatfield cut in sharply. "No—you would be searched, the rubies would be seized by the inspectors."

Ozara smiled cryptically. "I will be searched, but the rubies will not be on my person, I assure you, Senor. How they will reach Texas is my worry, not yours."

Hatfield began edging toward the basement stairs, never taking his guns off his targets. He was backing up the steps when Ozara called up to him, "One question, Senor, before we part. What good would the Snake Blood Rubies do you, if you cannot exhibit them in public? The government would say, how did you get these jewels, Senor Ogden, without paying import duty?"

At the door, Hatfield pocketed one derringer, reached behind him to twist the bolt in its socket.

"My reward, *vieja*, is an esthetic one which only a very rich man could possibly comprehend. The satisfaction of possessing something no other man in history since Montezuma himself possessed. And now, buenos noches, Ozara."

He opened the door and backed over the threshhold. The incredible old woman in the basement below called once more: "If we miss connections for any reason, what—"

"If the rubies are not in my hands by noon," Hatfield dropped his parting ultimatum, "the deal as we Texicans say, is off, *sabe usted*?"

He closed the door and headed down Avenida Azul, without any fear of a following bullet or knife. Alive, he was worth two million dollars, or so Ozara believed.

Dead, he was just a menace to Ozara's smuggling operations.

The clang of a bell startled Hatfield as he crossed the plaza toward the international bridge. Then, from the rush of last-minute crowds toward the gates, he realized it was the midnight curfew.

This incredible episode with Ozara had taken less than an hour by the clock. To Hatfield, it had seemed a lifetime.

CHAPTER X

Secret of the Tules

DAWN light streaked into the canyon of the Rio Grande, tinting the rising spray from the Devil's Stairway with myriad rainbow hues. In the thick cottonwood and willow bosque above the tule thickets where Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick had died with an arrow in his

chest, three men and a girl crouched in hiding, watching the wagon road which followed the Texas cliffs down-canyon. A lone horseman was coming up that road, still too far off to be recognized by the naked eye.

Ranger Jim Hatfield knelt behind a windfall cottonwood log, focussing a pair of field glasses on the approaching rider. He no longer wore a millionaire's costume, but was back to the cowboots, workshirt, chaps and stetson of an ordinary cowhand. But this morning, the proud emblem of the Texas Rangers was pinned to his shirt front. The need for anonymity was gone.

Very slowly, Hatfield lowered the glasses and turned to survey Ramona Chestwick and her two companions. Selwin Ogden and Sheriff Nate Willowby.

"I had expected Ozara herself to cross the river at sunrise and show up here by mid-morning," the Lone Wolf said. "I even requested the Mexican border authorities last night to do nothing to restrain the old washerwoman. But this rider coming is not Ozara."

The sheriff yawned wearily. Hatfield had not given any hint as to why he wanted the four of them to ride up-canyon by cover of night and secrete themselves in the same hideout where Border Patrolman Bob Chestwick had been guarding the tule thickets before his death.

All Hatfield had said was that he wanted the persons most interested in solving the mystery of Chestwick's murder—his daughter, the sheriff, and Ramona's future husband—to be on hand at the scene of that murder before daylight came.

"How about letting us in on the deal, Jim?" Willowby demanded petulantly. "I'm tired and sleepy and hungry. What would this Ozara woman be coming up here for, anyhow?"

Hatfield wriggled back to join them. "Ozara is smuggling the Snake Blood Rubies across the Rio Grande—or has already done so, if my hunch is correct," the Ranger said. "She wouldn't dare try to slip them across the bridge in a bundle of laundry—that's too trite, too obvious. So, unless I miss my guess, her son Pablo will smuggle them across the river at this point and she will pick them up."

Ramona Chestwick shook her head. "No, Jim. No smuggler could possibly put a boat across the river at this point. The current's too swift. You ought to know. You fished me out of it yesterday."

The sheriff groused impatiently, "Who's the rider? You say it isn't Ozara."

Hatfield's lips compressed. "That rider," he said, "is I am afraid, one of Ozara's confederates. He will pick up Pablo's smuggled rubies and slip them to the laundry woman when she comes across the river to contact Ogden at the hotel."

The sheriff stiffened. "Bob Chestwick's long suspected the smugglers worked in cahoots with somebody on this side of the river," he said, squinting through the foliage at the approaching horseman. "You figure this hombre could be a *contrabandista*?"

Hatfield shrugged. He was checking the cylinders of his Colt .45s now. The clip-clop of hoofs on the hard-beaten road reached their ears above the soft whisper of the morning wind in the tules.

"All we can do is wait and see if he goes exploring in the tules as Ramona's father was doing when he was hit by that Aztec arrow, amigos."

Further back in the chaparral, their horses were on picket. The four watched with fascinated suspense now as the rider suddenly reined off the road and headed down toward the water.

"He could be a rider heading up-river to Presidio, just taking his last chance to water his bronc before the road turns inland," Hatfield suggested.

The color was slowly receding from Sheriff Willowby's cheeks. Suddenly he grabbed the binoculars from Hatfield's hand and focussed them on the rider, now only a hundred yards away, slanting in toward the tule thickets.

"It's—it's Mayor Detwiler, Jim!" the old lawman gasped.

Hatfield nodded grimly. "I know."

"But I've known Sean for thirty years

we were kids together, he's no smuggler."

Ramona's tense whisper cut Willowby off: "Then why has he left his horse—why is he heading into the tules?"

THE LONE WOLF motioned the three to remain where they were. Alone, he began wriggling his way on his stomach through the willows and cottonwoods, until he came to the edge of the shale cutbank overlooking the tules.

Six-guns palmed, Jim Hatfield pulled himself to the brink of the ledge. He was looking straight down into the tules. Vivid against the green sword-shaped leaves of the water planks growing from the mud he saw three spots of bright color: red-dyed feathers affixed to arrows which were caught in the tules or imbedded in the mud below.

He saw the portly mayor of Escalera look surreptitiously up and down the canyon, as if to make sure there was no traffic at this early hour. Then, burrowing his way into the tules, Sean Detwiler worked his way through the thicket and, as Hatfield watched, collected not three but five Aztec arrows, each with an oversized metal tip, each with bright red dye on the feather tips.

Collecting the arrows in a bundle, Detwiler worked his way back out of the tules. It was at that moment that Jim Hatfield stood up and thumbed back the hammers of his six-guns.

"Is that why you murdered the county coroner last night, Mayor? To keep Ozara's collection of Aztec arrows intact?"

Detwiler whirled around, dropping the mysterious arrows as he thrust a hand under his coat lapel to jerk his Bisley .38 from leather. It took him a moment to locate the source of that accusing voice. When he finally looked up, it was to see Sheriff Nate Willowby and Selwin Ogden and Ramona Chestwick coming out of the brush to stand beside the Texas Ranger. Then Detwiler broke.

"Ramona—I didn't kill your Daddy!" Detwiler choked out in the high-pitched voice of a man close to being insane. "It was an accident—he saw one of Ozara's arrows hit the tules and he came out to investigate and another arrow hit him. It was an accident, Ramona."

The sheriff had his .410 shotgun trained on Detwiler now. Seeing that Detwiler was covered, Hatfield started running along the ledge to skirt the tules and approach Detwiler.

"Sean," Willowby said in a choked voice, "We been friends a long time, you and me and Cy Murdock. The Ranger accused you of knifing Cy last night to get the arrows. Is—is that true?"

Detwiler's gun was still in his hand, but it was pointing groundward. The mayor turned, squinting off across the Rio Grande toward the rimrocks of the Mexican cliffs across the river.

"I had to kill him, Nate. You don't understand—"

Jim Hatfield rounded the tules on Detwilers level now. He called out, "Drop the gun, Mayor. The Mexican authorities have picked up whoever shot the arrows over the river—Pablo, I imagine, for Ozara wouldn't have the strength to send an arrow two hundred yards."

As if his words had carried across the international boundry, the muted sound of a gunshot caught Detwiler's ear. He swiveled around, his back to Jim Hatfield, and caught sight of a row of silhouetted figures etched against the dawn-bright chihuahua skyline up there. Hatfield waved to answer the signal.

Detwiler recognized Pablo, the half-witted son of Ozara the smuggler. Pablo, whose unerring bow and arrow work had been the basic ingredient of the long standing success Detwiler and the Mexican woman had known, was now in the grip of uniformed Mexican border guards. And with them was the mother, the incredible Ozara herself, the wind bannering her mane of hair.

"Drop the gun and turn around slowly, Mayor," Hatfield's voice warned Detwiler a second time. "You can see for yourself your Mexican confederates are rounded up. This is Bob Chestwick's trap, Mayor. I imagine he was wise to you. Too bad he had to get in the way of one of Pablo's

arrows yesterday. I'll agree that Bob Chestwick was the victim of an acident."

Detwiler glanced up across the tules to where Willowby, his friend since boyhood, stood holding him under the menace of his shotgun. He saw Ramona, long one of his favorite persons, clinging to the man she would marry before this day had run its course, Selwin Ogden.

"Ogden," Detwiler choked out, "you'll get your Snake Blood Rubies, I guess. But you'll have to pay duty on 'em after all."

AS HE spoke, Detwiler whirled and fired his .38 at the man who had brought his doom about, Jim Hatfield. At point-blank range, it seemed impossible that his slug could miss, but it was wide, ripping a slot through the batwing of the Ranger's bullhide chaps.

With his own guns practically touching their target, Hatfield triggered his self-defense shots. Through a thick stench of gunsmoke he saw Detwiler topple back and fall, half hidden in the tules.

Texas Ranger justice had taken care of Ozara's confederate in outlawry. Across the river, the Mexican government would mete out their own special punishment to the amazing woman who had worked through the years with Detwiler and who, yesterday morning, had crossed the river to find Ramona Chestwick's telescope spying on this tule bed where Pablo, all unknowing, was shooting his arrows.

Hatfield stooped to pick up the five Aztec arrows which Detwiler had recovered from the tules. As the others joined him, he was carefully unscrewing one of the metal arrowheads from its threaded shaft.

"This is the trick Ozara and Detwiler used to out-fox the Border Patrol, the Customs boys and the Rangers for more years than we may ever know," the Ranger said. "It works with small but very valuable objects. Fired by night, no one would see the arrows coming over from the Mexican cliffs. Landing in these tules, the arrows were easily recovered and, striking soft mud, wouldn't break or damage their cargo. That's the secret your father was on the verge of discovering, Ramona, when he walked into these tules to inspect one of these arrows and was struck with one by accident."

As he was speaking, the arrowhead came free. It was hollow, and stuffed with cotton.

Out of the cushioning fibers and into the cup of the Lone Wolf's hand fell the contraband which had made its aerial flight across the Mexican border: a blood-red ruby that blazed in the first rays of the morning sun, a priceless gem that had once adorned the necklace of Montezuma, emperor of Aztec Mexico.

Today the curse of Ozara had been lifted at last.

Coming in the Next Issue

THE IRON FIST

A gripping, fast-moving Jim Hatfield novel
By JACKSON COLE

plus

MOVE OUT OR FIGHT

An Entertaining PHILIP KETCHUM *novelet*

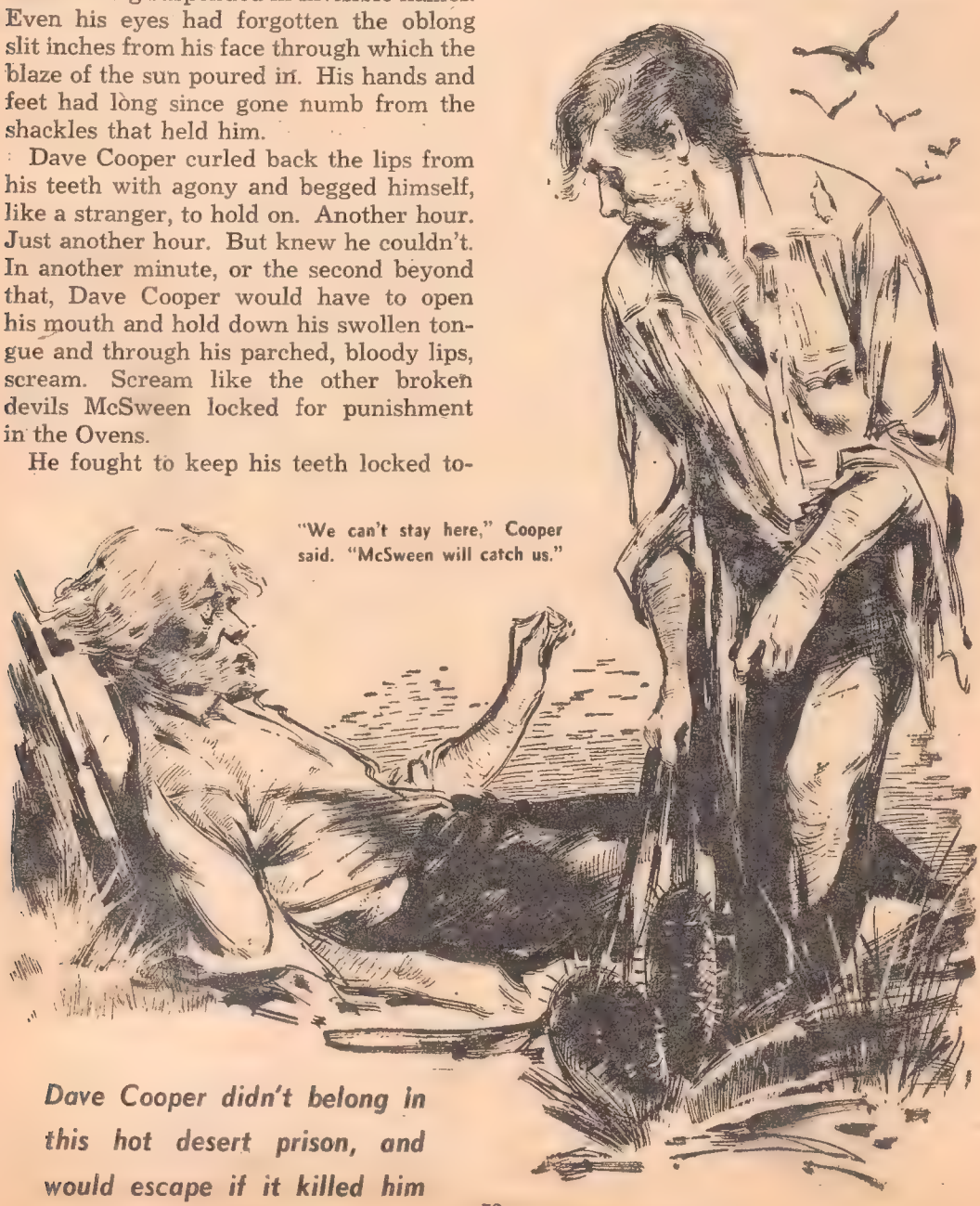
The Devil's Cookhouse

By
WARREN KUHN

HE WAS roasting alive. The black world about him was an oven of fire and he hung suspended in invisible flames. Even his eyes had forgotten the oblong slit inches from his face through which the blaze of the sun poured in. His hands and feet had long since gone numb from the shackles that held him.

Dave Cooper curled back the lips from his teeth with agony and begged himself, like a stranger, to hold on. Another hour. Just another hour. But knew he couldn't. In another minute, or the second beyond that, Dave Cooper would have to open his mouth and hold down his swollen tongue and through his parched, bloody lips, scream. Scream like the other broken devils McSween locked for punishment in the Ovens.

He fought to keep his teeth locked to-



"We can't stay here," Cooper said. "McSween will catch us."

Dave Cooper didn't belong in this hot desert prison, and would escape if it killed him

gether. Make it, he thought. Just a little more. Think about why—think about McSween.

The chief guard's bloated, brawl-scarred face came to his mind. McSween, Cooper thought. McSween, who had greeted him at the gate of the Devil's Cookhouse, the camp for incorrigibles carved into the Arizona desert, a place for those too tough for the Yuma prison. And Cooper still remembered the look in McSween's eyes—the look that told him McSween also remembered that wet night nine months before. And, despite the pain, Cooper forced himself to think back to that night . . .

Around them the darknes lay like a soggy Papago blanket. Restless horses pawed the muddy loam and below, in this canyon pocket of the high country, was Eureka, its one bank fat with gold.

Dave Cooper hunched under his slicker, his oiled gun loose in his hands, fingers over the chamber. He was taking no chances this night on a misfiring gun. Unlike the others he was not here by choice. He pondered the luck that had left one of their number wounded and dying the day before he'd ridden by accident into their camp. The dead man left a gap in their ranks and gave Cooper a chance of staying with them—and living. And then McSween had come.

In a life a man meets all kinds, men with cruelty stamped on them or a love for violence, as well as those few to whom death is like a drinking partner, full of laughter and fun. McSween was such a one. Cooper had grown to hate the sight of the barrel-shaped man. There would have been trouble sooner, but strangely McSween rarely stayed with them. He would bring news of a place to raid and then disappear. All they knew was McSween had an official job somewhere out in the desert country that gave him opportunities to gather information. Like that about Eureka.

Built by miners, the town below had grown heavy with gold being mined and spent and banked. The safe was an easy one. It would be a fast ride, a blast in the night, and escape. And tonight Cooper would at last ride with the others. Before this, he'd sat guarding the horses with one man always nearby, while the others raided. Tonight McSween himself had told him to ride. On this job McSween was riding with them, too.

Water dripped from the pines above and rivered down the slicker. But Cooper welcomed the rain. In it he would make his break. He'd planned this ever since he'd found himself a member of this bunch by benefit of a gunbarrel thrust against his belly.

Then the whispered orders came to mount up, and they were moving down through the pines into the town. Eureka slept, except for one far end where bawdy dancehalls poured noise into the night.

McSween had placed him just outside the bank. Another man waited warily at the door as the gang moved in. Seconds later a dull explosion sounded. Cooper cast a quick glance toward the man by the door, ducked and made for his horse, keeping the other stamping, nervous animals between him and the bank.

Down the street the explosion had brought sudden quiet to the festivities. Then people were spilling out of the saloons. Shouts went up. There was a quick flurry of shots. But the bunch was coming out now, hands heavy with gold sacks. Cooper found his horse, shoved a foot into the near stirrup, his hands reached for the horn. But he never made it.

There was the meaty slap of hand on rump. His horse danced away, Cooper hopped with it his boot still caught in the stirrup loop. Then McSween's big, grinning bulk came out of the darkness and a gun butt slashed down and the muddy night rose up and closed around Dave Cooper's face . . .

RED-HOT weights were pressing down onto his eyes and Cooper felt the salt from his chewed lips. Damn you, McSween, he thought, for that night.

The heat around him was unbearable but he fought it and thought of the trial

and of how swift and deadly it had been. There was no one to listen and none to believe. He'd been found dragging in the mud, while his outlaw friends had ridden off, and Eureka clutched at him in its fury, knowing only he was one of the bunch. And then he was on his way, not to overcrowded Yuma, the Territorial Prison, but to the blazing hole on the border they called *La Cocina del Diablo* —the Cookhouse of the Devil!

Now he was in one of McSween's 'ovens,' a sunken iron box in the ground, confined there for slugging one of the guards. The heat was beyond belief in the narrow box, beyond reason. It was all the curses he'd ever endured, all the beatings and all the pain. It was beginning and end in itself, blinding, blazing, unendurable heat. And Dave Cooper's lips split back upon themselves and his throat convulsed and he screamed, a gabbled cry of pain. No more—no more, he thought.

And the blackness was gone.

McSween's face grinned at him, framed against a blazing square of blue sky.

"So," McSween chuckled. "Is my little gamecock done?"

The shackles fell away and Cooper felt himself hauled upright between two guards.

"Maybe he needs a bit more roasting," McSween said. He tossed a quick glance at the baking sky and decided. "It's too hot for grave-digging. Take him to the doc."

They half-carried, half-dragged Cooper across the rocks to where the camp doctor had rigged a makeshift hospital of old canvas and brush.

Cooper had a sense of moisture trickling into his mouth and the doctor's hand pushing it away.

"That's enough—easy, man."

Before he slipped back into darkness, he heard the doc muttering, "Two days, two days he took," and caught the blurred sight of the man stumbling to a cot, lifting a bottle. Then Cooper lost consciousness.

He came out of it into full night. Someone had thrown a rough blanket over him and he could feel the coarseness against the tender rawness of his flesh. Dried sweat and grime covered him. His head throbbed, but his lips had lost their numbness. He could feel the deep, bloody cracks in them with his tongue. He shivered, feeling the cold of the desert night. It broke the barriers he'd set up in his mind and the thoughts came, tumbling into place, coming back from where he'd locked them two days earlier.

Dave Cooper thought of why he had taken the Ovens, asking for McSween's torture. And the clear, sweet vision of escape came full again to his mind.

You've done it, he thought. You've taken it, and you're out.

He thought of Hunneker and Lopez, remembering now. His eyes stared up at the black stretch of canvas above and off to his right he could see the broken lattice of brush and through it the silver pinpoints of stars. They beckoned to him, telling of the places beyond, of mountains and cool streams and freedom.

The seeing flowed through him like fresh water, bearing away the burn and the pain, and he thought of McSween and the first shadow of a smile came onto his face. It was Dave Cooper's first smile in nine months.

Slowly, forcing down the agony that flooded up along his shoulders from where the boxlike iron oven had burned him, he swung himself to a sitting position on the bunk. His bare feet hit the cold ground and he winced, the blanket falling away from his legs. His head reeled, mind alive with thinking.

It had been Hunneker's idea in the first place, born of ten years rotting in the Cookhouse. When the old man had first approached him, whiskered face cautious and suspicious, Cooper had shrugged him off. It was later—much later—that he'd listened seriously to Hunneker's plan to break out.

"A chance, see," Hunneker had explained. "But only a young'un like you could take it. Or maybe you can't, I don't know." Hunneker's yellow eyes had grown blank with old fear. "I know

the ovens. After a while you can't stand it and you scream and yell and yank your hands against the chains."

Hunneker coughed hackingly.

"Only you gotta last two days at least. Long enough to get into the doc's tent. Long enough to be dead almost." And Hunneker had grinned through his broken teeth. "And then it's easy." He pointed up at the rock face of the cliff that surrounded the prison camp, except for the guarded pass, the only way out. "See, nobody'll bother you in the doc's tent. You can slip out, grab a rope from the supply tent and go up."

He paused stiffly.

"But no tricks. Leave me in the cell and I yell my bloody head and they'll pick you off with those rifles like they was shooting lizards on a rock."

Cooper forced his legs to hold him. His hands groped for the tent wall. He'd taken the two days in the Ovens, all right, but it had sucked him dry, burning the marrow from his bones and drying his blood.

HUNNEKER would be waiting. And Lopez, the Mexican, their cell-mate, who knew the country outside. Without Lopez, they'd be out of luck. Fifty miles of desert stretched toward the Sonoran mountains. And there were always the waiting Pimas, ready to bring you back for the prison bounty. Cooper leaned weakly against the wall. His bones felt like leather straps bending inside of him with weakness.

There was no guard at the door of the tent. Only the whiskey snores of the doc, saliva-edged rattles making soft, mumbling noises in the night. McSween had long since learned that no man sent to the Ovens for making trouble had ever walked from the bed in the sawbone's tent.

Outside, Cooper crouched low. The hospital tent, along with the supply shack lay flush against one cliff wall at the farthest end of the camp. A hundred yards away were the guard barracks and McSween's private quarters. Directly opposite in the vast open bed of this mountain-walled pocket were the Holes.

Not even the Devil himself in his most evil dreams could have invented the Holes. Spawned by an ancient upreaching of tortured rock, they had originally been deep and uneven crevices, pocking the mountain floor. Erosion had worn them mostly smooth, filling the crevice bottoms so men could stand in them. Years of prison labor had done the rest—chipped each crevice into rough pits, too deep to scale save by rope or ladder and roofed with thatch, like a necklace of ugly spider holes strung through the barren rocks. In each, five and six, and sometimes seven, men baked out their lives as incorrigibles under burning desert skies or frigid moons, making pets of tarantulas and footlong brown centipedes.

And for nine months Dave Cooper had rotted in one of these dank dungeons, rousted out at dawn to labor in the quarries and butted back inside at night. Nine months of Hunneker and his foul stench and broken teeth, and of Lopez and his little, many-legged friends with names like Pepita and Carozzo and General Santa Anna.

And now he was free.

He swung, still in a crouch, to look at the far wall. Long weeks before, Cooper had studied the rock wall, memorizing places that looked best for the rope to hang. The rope, he thought, and he started over the ground like an injured animal, his blistered body shivering with pain.

The supply shack was padlocked, but the hasp was rusted. Cooper's bloody fingers worked at it until the old screws pulled loose and the door swung open. The rope was easy to find, coils of it were lying all over in disordered piles. He measured off a hundred-foot length—more, he couldn't carry, he knew. He draped it over one raw shoulder.

The rasp of the fibers on his skin lifted the dullness from his mind and he felt the gritty floor of the shack under his bare feet. Without shoes or clothes, save the tattered rags at his waist that passed for

pants, he'd last maybe an hour out on the desert. Groping, he found a pile of filthy prison garb, and with it some other dirty castoffs of the guards. He found a woolen shirt, greasy pants, and eased his tortured feet into several pairs of old boots before finding some that fit. These he shoved under one arm, slug the rope again over his shoulder and wearing the clothes, he started barefoot for the Holes.

The dark shadowy cliff rose behind him and the pits seemed an endless distance away. His ears strained for any sound and then suddenly the sound of whistling seemed to smack against his ears.

Dirt was like cold sandpaper against his stomach, he pushed his chin into earth. He flattened, his fingers pressed against sharp rocks. And the footsteps thudded closer, stumbling. Cooper felt his body shrink into itself, drawing into a tight, bruised ball. He was part of the earth, the wheeze of his lungs thick in his throat, holding back his need for air.

The feet thudded over more heavily and then shifted just enough to pass within yards of Cooper's head. The whistling was uninterrupted, the whistler lost in the happy, rose-colored vapors of rotgut. And then the man was gone, the thud of his boots vanishing off across the rocks.

McSween, Cooper thought tightly, and decided against it. Just a guard, probably, but one was bad enough. No prisoners ever escaped the Cookhouse, or lived when they were brought back. McSween saw to that. McSween—or the Pimas.

Rising, he moved on toward the low shapes that were the Holes. The first three he passed. The fourth was his, a misshapen rectangle thick on the earth. Cooper knelt, peering about and then he grunted.

"Hunneker."

"That you, kid?" The answer was immediate, close to his feet, rising out of the pit. "Got the rope?"

Cooper moved aside the boards that served as trapdoor. He shook the rope down. "Grab it," he said.

They came up, sprawling beside him, with Lopez turning once to peer back down inside. Hunneker cursed him.

"You crazy greaser," he muttered. "You and those lousy varmints!"

Lopez' answered was a snarled reply.

"*Cerrada la boca, viejo!*" He spat out the words. "From your filthy mouth, old man, comes vermin!"

"Why you—"

Hunneker started to straighten and Cooper clapped a hand against his bony shoulder.

"We got an hour before the moon rises—if you want to get out of here." Cooper's voice was flat. "Let's move."

THE first patches of ghostlight from the moon, orbing like an eye over the black peaks, hit the crags first, turning them pale white. Then like foam, moonlight poured down, throwing the barracks and the Holes far below into sharp distant relief.

Cooper knelt on the rock ledge. He was trembling, his sore body sheened with chill perspiration. Above him stretched another forty feet of broken cliff. From below came the curses of Hunneker and further down, clutched to the rock face, the lithe, spidery shape of Lopez, clinging like one of his own poisonous pets.

A fine pair Cooper thought bitterly. The nine months seemed like a nightmare to Dave Cooper. He was still young enough to remember cold milkpails and skinning out of a warm bed in the frosty Missouri dawn, young enough to know how it felt for a kid to start West alone, turning a job here as a wrangler, there swamping saloons, and finally popping brush for longhorns.

And then he had come into the desert country where McSween had found and used him and put the mistaken brand of outlaw on him.

And now you're here, raw as a skinned wolf, trying to bust free of hell, he thought.

Cooper's flesh crawled with tiny fires, embers of pain in his muscles like smoldering ash inside his bones. Twice, climbing the cliff, star-peppered pinwheels whirled

in his eyes and his tired hands almost lost their grip on the rope. Only sheer will had kept him from dropping, to fall like a squashed bug on the rock floor.

"Give us a hand, kid," Hunneker grunted. An oily reek washed over the ledge as Hunneker pulled up and lay panting. In the moonlight, Cooper saw Hunneker's hands reach for the rope where it looped over an outcropping of rock. Below, Lopez slithered up, hand over hand.

"If we didn't need that greasy—" Hunneker muttered.

Cooper was silent and then as Lopez scrambled up beside them on the narrow ledge, he said, "Loose the rope. We've got another forty feet to go. And remember—each one of us needs the other."

Dawn was slow in coming, the grayness filling the open country with shadowy cactus and palo verde. But when it finally brought the early light, it came fast as morning always comes on the desert. Cooper was thankful for the coolness that had soothed his burns; it would soon be sucked into the open mouth of the day's furnace. But he was feeling better. His body's natural grease and sweat had worked into the blistered reaches of his back and legs, easing them a bit. He pushed out of his mind what the day's full heat would do to his cooked skin. Time enough to worry about that—if they had time.

Alone of the three, he kept searching the open country ahead and then the black bulk of the cliffs that were now hours behind them. Hunneker stumbled as he walked, his legs weakening, ropy saliva working through the gaps in his broken, yellowed teeth. Far ahead, Lopez trotted down a wash, then up and along its brink, feet moving steadily, black head down, more like desert creature than a man. Cooper brought up the rear, the frayed rope still bumping under his arm. He had tried to part with it when they left the mountains, but without it they had nothing but torn fingers and weakened bodies to defend themselves. So the rope stayed with Cooper, like sometimes a drowning man will clutch at sinking brush.

A guard or McSween or maybe even the doc, Cooper knew, would have found him gone by now. The morning shout-out would establish Hunneker and Lopez absent, too. McSween would be wise enough to think of the cliffs and horses would be saddled, immediately.

"Lopez," Cooper yelled. "Hold up."

With Hunneker stumbling several yards back, Cooper moved toward Lopez.

"We get out of here, *muy pronto*," Lopez said. "Pimas hunt here, in the next five, six mile."

"Hunneker's done in," Cooper said. He could see the fear in Lopez' wide, frightened eyes, but he could hear, too, the painful wheezing of the old man flopping down beside them. Hunneker threw his head back, gulping for air, his thin chest sinking in and out like the bony breast of a desert turkey.

"Got to rest—" Hunneker moaned. "Can't breathe."

"We can't stay here," Cooper said, bending beside him. "McSween's probably on his way."

Lopez stood up and moved away a few feet, his eyes making wide, circling glances of the cactus-studded flatlands.

"I go," Lopez said. "Death is thick here, senors!"

Cooper staggered up, not realizing how tired he'd been until he let his muscles stiffen for a few moments. He took a step forward, the rope sliding down into his hands. He held it like a thick club.

"You're not going yet," he said. "Hunneker's done in."

"Then let the *viejo* die," Lopez snarled. He pranced off, a frightened jackrabbit of a man. "Adios!"

COOPER took a few running steps and felt his knee buckle, felt himself going down. Lopez gave a single glance back and was gone, running out of sight down a brush-choked arroyo. Wearily, Cooper turned back to Hunneker who lay prone, chest heaving. Saliva began to drain down one corner of Hunneker's

mouth.

Around them the growing light of morning began to pick out peaks of the mountains they'd left. They were in a flat, vast valley of which the cliffs behind were but a worn, distant landmark. South, somewhere, lay the border, Cooper knew. How many miles, which way was best, where the ravines were that could hide a man, only Lopez knew—and he was gone, scurrying off like a long-eared jack before the rising sun.

You've lost your way out, Cooper told himself, without emotion. He felt drained, scoured dry of feeling. Only pain was still alive in him. Pain and the remembrance of the 'ovens' and of McSween.

He turned back to Hunneker and then he bent and heaved at the man's thin arms. The scrawny body came upright and Hunneker's bleary eyes opened.

"Can't—can't." Hunneker mumbled through splintered teeth. But Cooper ignored him and put painful effort into a heave that yanked the man upright.

"McSween's coming, man," Cooper said. "We've got to keep moving."

And to himself, he thought: Why? So McSween can pick us up more dead than alive. For a long moment he found himself not caring. He felt spent, gone.

He held Hunneker up and stumbled a few steps with him. Then Hunneker's head swung about and suddenly he cried: "Lopez!" His eyes bulged. "That greasy Mex is gone."

Hunneker broke free and took several half-running plunges and went down, falling like empty sacking, rolling to lie face-downward. Cooper stumbled, knelt and eased Hunneker over. The bearded face stared at the blue sky, broken teeth rimmed the wrinkled, stained mouth that still lay open in a final gasp for air. Hunneker was dead.

Cooper looked down at the sand, thinking old thoughts about the need for a grave and knowing it was a thing near to madness. If he tried it, he'd need two graves—one for Hunneker, the other for himself. He stepped over Hunneker's body and turned once again to look south where Lopez had disappeared.

Which way? he thought. How far? And he knew, clearly, that McSween or the Pimas would find him long before he could find the border. So he turned again, one hand still holding the rope as if he hung onto a final, last hope. Back there was the Cookhouse and the Holes, but back there also were crags and caves and maybe places where one man could hide.

A voice in him laughed and mocked. It would be a futile thing, hiding in McSween's own rocks. A day, maybe two, without grub or water, and a man would begin to think of the pure goodness of a bullet in the brain, or look longingly at the jagged boulders far below.

Cooper had a choice. The desert, like Hunneker, or the cliffs, waiting like a wounded rabbit. His fingers gripped the frayed burr of the rope, and he started back toward the cliffs.

There was really no choice, Cooper thought. Death comes always. Why fight it? He wished for only one thing. And knew he'd never get it.

It was a prayer a dead man makes, knowing it won't be answered. One thing, he thought, with it rolling in his mind like a hot coal on a greased shovel. A chance at McSween.

NINE hundred winters back, a brown-skinned people had made the vegas, stone-axing them out of green timber. Mud and stone had chinked the cracks and then because of war or plague or the drying up of springs, the people had left. And only the mud and timbers remained, lost man-built caves perched in natural declivities in the rock face of the cliff.

And so Cooper found them. The sun had made half the arc between dawn and nooning when Dave Cooper dragged himself up the broken trail and lay in the debris of an ancient garbage dump. Cactus and rock had ripped his clothes, shredded them and the blistered flesh showed through, in some places red-plastering the cloth.

When he'd found the strength, he crawled into the dark, sandy floor of a

pueblo room. Something scurried away into darkness and he let his head drop on his arm, the rope under him and he slept.

It was the sound of hooves that wakened him, that and the gnawing agony in his stomach. Cooper shoved his guant, raw frame to the door, peering out cautiously. The slanted sunlight of late afternoon threw long shadows around the horses below. Riders were strung out, shouting to each other wearily, but most slumped in their saddles, knees pressed hard against dusty leathers. The day's furnace glare had sapped them.

Cooper stiffened. On two uneasy pack-ponies lay the slack shapes of men. He recognized instantly the scrawny outline of Hunneker, but the other bothered him. Wiping a dirty hand across his stinging eyes, he stared harder and made out the scorched stumps of hands and legs. Cooper shut his eyes, pulling his head away from the sight. The Pimas had had fun with Lopez before they turned him back to McSween.

A burly, thick-set rider came up from the flats, hard voice bawling orders. Few men moved. Those that did, goaded their mounts with a sullen weariness. McSween passed them, dismounted and started up the cliff. Three of the riders followed his example, climbing the broken ledges to the left and right.

Quickly. Cooper jerked back his head. It was gloomy inside the pueblo, but enough light remained to show an irregular opening at the rear and beyond, a low passageway. Worming his way through the hole, he squirmed up through the dank and ancient quarters. Then he was out on the low roof, with only yards above him to the smoke-blankened stone cave roof. A few feet to his left was the edge of the roof. Just beyond yawned a black, square opening.

Cooper crawled to the edge. The opening was deep and shrouded in darkness. Foul mustiness hung over it. His elbow dislodged a small rock that plummeted downward to hit bottom far below.

McSween and his men were drawing nearer. Deciding, Cooper looped his frayed rope around an exposed vega and let the free end slither down into the darkness. Then he let himself down slowly over the edge. It was a difficult descent, but his searching toes found support about a man's length down.

He was on a dug-out ledge. His hands raised clouds of choking dust and his fingers found pots and the rib-slender feel of human skeletons. Then a man's rough voice boomed angrily above and Cooper flattened.

It was McSween. Cooper listened while other voices rose and faded in the background, an idea forming in his mind. Bracing himself, he pushed upward hanging hard on the rope, the burr of it eating into the skin of his hands.

Then his eyes were level with the top of the hole. McSween crouched by a flickering torch, his tired back to the hole. Carefully, Cooper drew his head down, hanging on the rope by one arm, the other free and pressed against the rock. And Cooper moaned.

McSween turned like a startled bear. He grabbed the torch, lumbered forward. Shadows hid the rope and he peered suspiciously into the darkness. Then the moaning came again. McSween crouched, bending over the edge. And Cooper struck, his free hand going around McSween's neck, yanking down.

Caught unawares, McSween tried to catch himself, couldn't and came down on his knees, heavily, hands flailing over empty air. His eyes were wide with shock, but his reflexes were those of an animal. Instinctively, his body flattened, legs scraping in an attempt to pull himself back out of danger.

McSween had seen Cooper at the same instant. Even as Cooper strained at the thick neck, McSween brought the flaming torch around in a savage sweep. Cooper felt the hot teeth of the ashes spatter his neck and with a sudden desperate fury he kicked out from the wall, every ounce of him driving outward with taut leg muscles.

With an ugly scraping of rock, McSween came over the edge. His fingers

clawed at Cooper. And found the woolen shirt, held onto the ripped, strong shreds of it.

They swayed there, Cooper wrapped around the rope, McSween's struggling bulk pulling him down. A strange, heaving mass of arms and fingers and thrusting legs, dangling in fetid utter blackness.

THEN the rope loosened, gave. Cooper felt its abrupt release and he tried to straighten, McSween still clutching him. They hit the ledge, hard, and Cooper found McSween's ponderous bulk rising, arms outstretched to wring out his life. He ducked, swerving away from the powerful brute force of the other man.

Then there was broken pottery under his feet, the edge of rock, and then—nothing. With a final twist of his body he drew back, feeling McSween's lunge coming at and by him, and with the last of his strength he drove his arms down across McSween's neck and the man toppled past, going straight out into darkness. Out and down.

McSween's men shouted for him. Above the shadowy ledge, the shouts rang out in the ancient pueblo and one torch came flaming down into the pit to die in the dust below. But not before they saw his body.

"Mother of God! He fell!"

And another cried, "Get a rope."

But there was protest. They knew these dark caves and the rustling death that could sink sharp needles into a man's leg and let him scream and swell before he died. And finally, masking their fear with curses, they pulled out, leaving the pueblo alone to dusk and darkness.

In the two days that followed, Cooper bided his time and was lucky. McSween's men had found the man's private cache of whiskey and the celebration that followed made roping one of their horses an easy thing.

For food Cooper found a nest of eaglets and snared two jacks and drank well from a spring he discovered in a mineral-stained pocket of green-gold rock. He ate and rested, knowing the guards would leave him to the desert, sure of its deadliness. And on horseback he was safe from the Pimas.

He thought of McSween in the dark pit, knowing the man's passing would be forgotten in the dust of centuries there that had forgotten others. He regretted it, too, knowing that McSween had held the key to the name man had branded Cooper with. For good or bad, the reasons for it would lay forgotten with the body below.

But the world was a young place, he knew, and the wide country to the north and west asked only what a man could do. Cooper had a rope and a horse, and thinking it, he worked down out of the pueblo to where he had hidden the mount and saddled up.

A rope and horse could take a man a long way if he were willing, Cooper told himself—those and the honest sweat of his hands.

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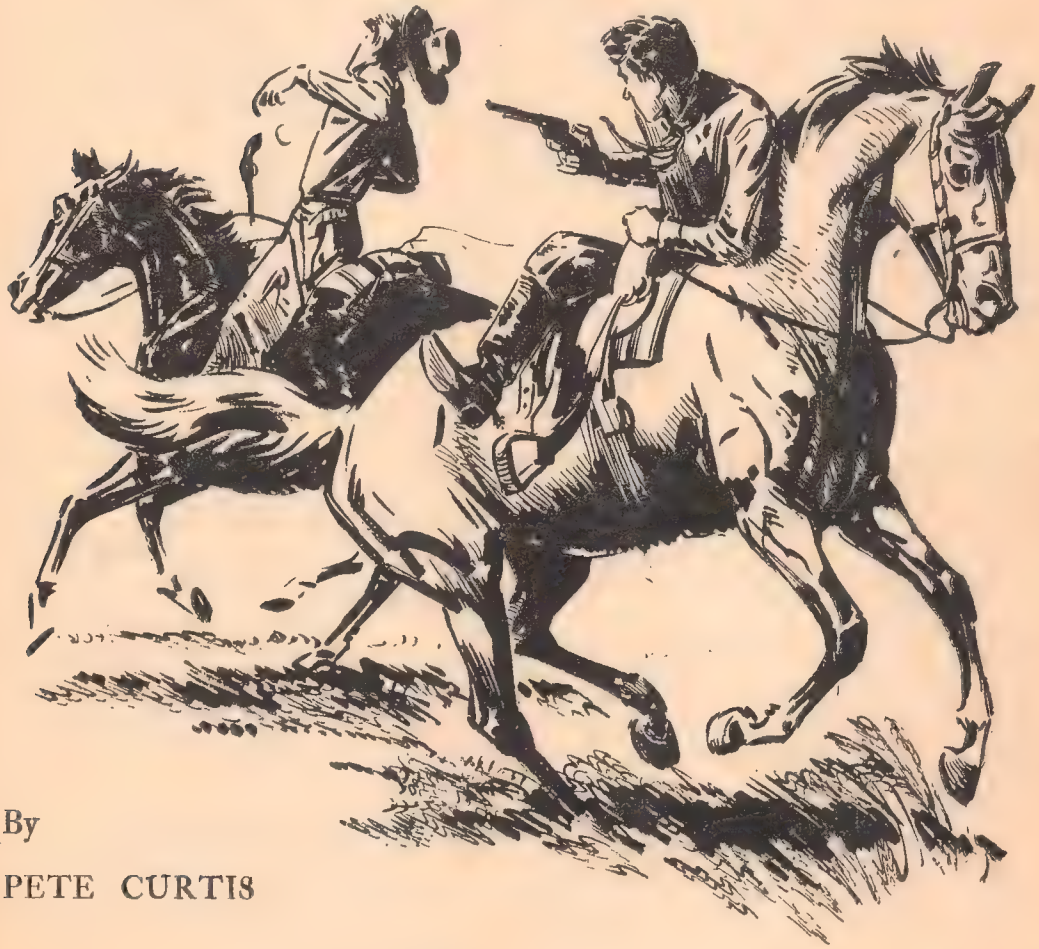

By

PETE CURTIS

IT WAS mid-morning when Lee Cafferty and one of his riders, Hank Mason, were interrupted from hunting strays. The sight of a dust streamer angling off the bluff and pointing into Cafferty's bench land caught their eye. Cafferty had whistled at Mason to draw his attention to the dust. They paused long enough to finally make out a two-team hitch and wagon, and wondered why anyone would travel the hill trail this time of year. Then Cafferty motioned his rider to join him and they spurred their ponies down the hillside. He intended to find out why visitors were drifting his range.

They picked up the faint grass-filled ruts and followed them toward the oncoming rig. Breaking clear of a gully and onto a long, gentle slope, they had full view of the wagon and the two men on the box. Moments later they recog-

The sheep woman was too pretty to fight, but Cafferty fought . . .

nized the Sims brothers, Tom and Charlie, a pair of bachelors who were general handy men in the Lost River valley. They lived on a plot of timber land east of Winchester and were suspected of having a penchant for stocking their meat supply now and then with their neighbors beef. Lee Cafferty, remembering this, felt less in a welcoming mood.

Tom Sims, the elder brother, hauled back on the reins as Lee and Hank drew abreast of the wagon. He nodded curtly, a lank, unkempt individual who was notable for his perpetual grumpiness. Charlie was a near likeness of Tom, and both eyed Lee Cafferty with sullen nervousness.

"Just passing through," Tom muttered. "To the hills yonder." He flicked a horny hand toward the western height of land.

"Your place run to slash, Tom?" Lee inquired with faint irony, for he had noticed the tools and camp gear in the wagon bed.

"We're not cutting for ourselves. Been hired for a building job."

Alarm rippled through Lee Cafferty and put a coldness in his speech. "Nate Osprey and Curley House do the hiring?"

Tom Sims quickly shook his head. "A lady hired us—a young lady."

"Stranger she was, too," added Charlie, with unnecessary emphasis.

"Young lady?" echoed Hank Mason.

Lee Cafferty said skeptically, "Now just what does this strange young lady want you fellows to build?"

"A cabin—couple of out-sheds," Tom Sims answered surily. "Reckon she aims to settle yonder."

Cafferty derided such apparent fabrications. "Ease up on the bull a little, Tom. Whatever Osprey and House have put you up to, forget it."

"He's telling the truth!" Charlie Sims said as though desperately trying to convince Lee Cafferty. "She came to us a spell back and made us ride up here and point out her site. Payed us mighty handsome, too."

"Hush up, Charlie," growled Tom Sims.

"Where's her man?" Lee Cafferty asked, more inclined to believe them now.

"She ain't got one, far as I know," said Tom.

Cafferty and his rider glanced at each other with incredulity. The hills west of Cafferty's layout were uninhabited. Grass sprouted on the slopes and in the valleys, Lee ran cattle there during the summer months. Other than that, those hills were as remote and lonely as unexplored wilderness, and it was no place for a lone lady to satisfy her homestead itch.

"What's the lady's name?" Cafferty asked.

"Harwell," replied Tom, without hesitation. "Miss Sari Harwell."

Cafferty nodded thoughtfully. Anyone who wanted to settle in the hills had legal right to do so. He did not hold title on that upland grass, and not much on this bench country. It was free land, the same as when he had boldly, and without regard for the tenuous rights of the established cattle outfits, driven his herds to this bench land and sequestered it from Nate Osprey and Curley House. Those two—even though their great herds ranged far and wide—had never forgiven his brash invasion. He, a stranger then, had accomplished a feat which none other in the Lost River had dared attempt.

He motioned to the Sims brothers, "All right. But when you're hunting, don't drift down too far this way and mistake one of my cows for a deer. So long, boys."

Charlie Sims' eyes glanced away at no particular object and Tom muttered hurtfully, "You got no call to say a thing like that to me and Charlie."

"So long, boys," Cafferty repeated more slowly.

TOM SIMS turned, long lips compressed into dour design and with a sudden, angry movement he slapped the reins. The team lurched into their collars. Cafferty and his rider watched the rig move up the slope.

Hank Mason turned to Cafferty and said, "I never heard the like, boss. Can you figure it?"

Lee Cafferty shrugged his broad shoulders. "Some folks like solitude, I reckon."

"Guess so," Hank replied. "Out of all these pilgrims crawling across the landscape, bound to run across a few with some queer notions. But I never heard of a woman hermit before—especially a young one." His weather-ruddied face broke into a grin. "Makes a guy wonder."

"Sure does, Hank," murmured Cafferty, as he looked on the dark greens and deeper blue hues of the western heights. It would be tough on a woman living alone up there. When the snows flew, it could very well be plain suicide for one without mountain savvy. Surely, by now, she had been warned of the extreme difficulties she was bound to encounter.

He found himself vaguely irritated and a little worried. When the time came for her move, he would find himself her nearest neighbor, and he knew he would have to keep a weather-eye trained toward the hills. He had his doubts that the young lady would be able to fend for herself for very long.

There was no special reason for Lee Cafferty to go to Winchester on Saturday morning, other than curiosity and a change of scenery. He hoped to get his look at the strange pilgrim who called herself Sari Harwell. He parked himself on the hotel gallery a couple of hours prior to the noon.

In a land of many men and few women, his keeping lookout for a new, young and ostensibly unattached woman was not wholly without scheme, for Cafferty was as richly endowed with manhood as any other buck who rode the Lost River. Though he had few friends roundabout, it was not his fault. Lost River was cattle country, and Cafferty, though of the breed, was considered an outcast among his own kind—because of Osprey and House.

He was not too disappointed not catching sight of a new feminine face. The time he spent relaxing on the hotel gallery was pleasant enough. Lee Cafferty had seldom known prolonged intervals of easy living, for there had been other men from the same mould as Osprey and House to deal with, and once in awhile men of the ilk of Joe Stone.

Stone, the new rider Nate Osprey hired, was not a mystery to Cafferty. He had the earmarks of his real profession—a hired gun. To what extent the two big cattlemen would employ that gun, only time would tell, but Lee Cafferty was not one to back away from any man.

Lee had his noon meal at the Chinaman's. After a casual smoke beneath a board awning he ambled toward the saloon. Saturday's crowd, the influx of cowhands and the first of the newly arrived nesters, clustered or strolled the boardwalks. Cafferty gently shouldered his way through a group before the doors of the saloon and walked toward the bar.

His swift look found Nate Osprey and Curley House in that line of drinkers. He made space for himself, instantly feeling the twinge of wariness those two men invariably gave him. He stood at the elbow bend of the bar, men on either side of him —men who had known him long enough to be neighborly but who only nodded their greetings. So he drank alone, not caring, for he had long ago learned to be at peace with his own company.

Occasionally he noted the cursory glances of Osprey and House. Those two had their heads together, and House's florid face, denoting long years of hard living and riding, lowered and raised now and then to some palavering bit of wisdom Osprey was feeding to his ear.

Curley House was one of the first of the old cowmen to drive his herds to the Lost River, his holdings, now, were so enormous they had become cumbersome and difficult to manage. Lee Cafferty knew it was Nate Osprey who kept the older man stirred up concerning Cafferty's pre-empting the bench land. Osprey had won his right to that graze in identical manner some years back, but now, in his book, it was wrong for another man to follow suit, whether his and House's cattle had other ample forage or not.

A holding, unpleasant grin seemed to be Osprey's trademark this day. At least, the grin was unpleasant to Cafferty. He

felt that Osprey considered himself as holding high cards, now that Joe Stone was stalking the Lost River and lounging on the walks of Winchester.

A short spell later Cafferty slanted a look at their backs—Osprey tall, easy-moving and handsome, House short but solidly rugged—as they walked to the swinging doors. And almost on the heels of their departure, Joe Stone entered. Cafferty did not notice the man until he placed his deceptively thin frame—deceptive because his hands were large and blunt, the wrist flat and thick—down the bar a shoulders' breath away.

Lee Cafferty, acutely conscious of the man's nearness, appeared wholly disinterested and unaware, but he made it a point to refrain from taking more whiskey. There was a time and place to enjoy it, but not when the possibility of gunplay was at hand. He had no sure way of knowing this was the time and place, but all his senses were now attuned and ready. He would not be caught by surprise.

Yet Joe Stone made no sign of his intentions, other than that of a man satisfied he had dropped in for a cold beer. Cafferty pushed back from the bar then, both hands remaining on the rounded, slick mahogany rim, and slowly turned his head to lay a measuring glance against the other man.

JOE STONE met the look, his expression vapid and inscrutable. And for many long seconds they stood thus without moving. For the first time Cafferty had a close view of Joe Stone. The man's face was weather-rough, almost parchment-like with its dried burn, whereas Cafferty's skin was darkly bronze with an alive, vital color. Many an unreadable story was etched on Stone's harsh features, of a life filled with too little of good things and too much of the other.

It was Joe Stone who at last turned his face away. Cafferty swung carefully on a heel and with slow strides made for the doors. He knew this subtle play would not be completed until he had the doors behind his back. If his name were called, then he knew what would have to be done. But his name was not sounded, and he stepped through the doors to the walk, his eyes squinting against the bright glare of the street.

It had been a play to scrape against his nerves, but as far as Lee was concerned, it had jammed. His narrowed look swept along the walks, knowing that he would find the two watchful inciters of the little byplay between Stone and him. When he spotted them in the shade of an awning across the street, a thin smile pulled at his lips. Individually, he had the feeling those two were chary of him. Not that they lacked courage. It was a matter of discretion, as of a coyote not jumping a curly wolf.

He turned then toward the hotel and his pony. He tightened the cinch, swung to leather, and rode out of Winchester.

The days passed for Lee Cafferty without much thought for the girl who intended to cloister herself in the hills. She was completely dimmed in his mind when on a windless, sun-brilliant day he rode his bench and came upon the old ruts. The sight immediately recalled to his mind the girl and the Sims brothers.

Iron tires had recently indented the ruts, he noted. Without doubt the Sims had finished their carpentry work and by now the girl had moved into her new home. Curiosity bit at him again, holding him motionless in saddle. Then, with sudden decision he lifted reins and pointed his horse toward the rising tangents of the hills.

He followed the ruts into the long, narrow valley through which coursed the Little Lost River. The tangy, clean pine and sage scent touched in his nostrils. Sometime later he passed his vacant line cabin. And then where the valley broadened and the timber broke away to climb the steep slopes, he saw the new layout below. Moments later he pulled back on the reins with an abrupt, almost startled motion.

He sat arrested in the saddle, not quite believing what his eyes mirrored. Aside

from the cabin and out-buildings, there were sheep pens!

The feeling that roiled through Lee Cafferty was not a pleasant or tolerant one. He kept his pony rooted for some minutes, his dark thoughts sifting and weighing but reaching no definite conclusion. One thing he knew for certain; sheep roaming this section of the hills would put an end to summer graze for his cattle.

He saw the girl once, during this pause, when she came from the cabin and walked to an out-building and then returned. He was still too far away to ascertain even the true shade of her hair, other than to note its fairness. At the cabin door, she halted momentarily before entering to gaze out steadily toward the dark and serrated peaks rimming the sky in the southwest.

Cafferty lifted reins then and started down to the cabin, the expression of his face, grim and studious. As he broke clear of the brush into the grassy clearing, his eyes swung about, observing favorably Tom and Charlie Sims' building craftsmanship but otherwise feeling a hard and unrelieved anger for those two.

When his gaze fell back on the cabin, he saw the girl standing in the doorway, her manner instantly striking him as aloofly appraising. Her self-possession was obvious, as was the handsomeness of her straight, supple body and delicate features. Her eyes showed him no friendship, but neither did they show her to be resentful at his coming; their hazel shadowing seemed to observe him with vague curiousity, as though she had been expecting him.

It was difficult for Cafferty to grasp the reality of this girl's plans to run sheep in the hills. The wonder of it settled his anger somewhat as he halted his pony and touched his hat brim courteously. "Ma'am," he drawled. "I'm Lee Cafferty. My first notion was to make this a neighborly call—"

"I was told that you would look on my settling in this valley with disfavor," she broke in simply.

He shook his head. "Not that you've settled here, but that your purpose is to run sheep."

"Are you going to fight me then?"

Her direct question left him a little frustrated. He finally replied, "I don't know. If so, it would be the sheep, and not you I'd fight."

"I will protect my sheep, my land and myself, as best I know how," she stated firmly. "I want to know just where I stand with you. And I want *you* to know that I am a good rifle shot."

THE even-tempered quality of her voice held Lee Cafferty in awed abeyance. He had no doubt that she could steel her words with action. The paradox of this girl was a strangeness beyond all his varied relations with his fellow man during far wanderings.

His eyes studied her intently now. In her facial shadings was a firmness of purpose most salient, denoting, he thought, an iron hold on courage which had brought her from the eastern states to this frontier and which had so innocently cast her into a restless and troubled land. Obviously she sought independence and, perhaps, a resurrection of woman's proud virtue. Whatever had caused her to forsake the past, mused Lee Cafferty, no doubt had been a bitter and hurtful experience.

He asked, "You found herders for your flocks?" That aspect of it was puzzling to him, for a sheepman knew the penalty of encrouchment upon cattle country.

"I am beginning modestly," she told him. "But there is one old Mexican herder who will soon be with me."

"And the sheep?"

Her smooth brow lifted. "Should I be so free with an enemy?"

"I never make my move," he said with solemnity, "until after I've given warning."

"Well, then," and she pointed to the jagged crests in the southwest, "the sheep will come through there. I understand there is a passage. The herders helping my old sheepman will turn back at that point."

"Right in the back door," murmured

Cafferty, gazing out to the purple-painted mountains.

She observed, "I believe this is fine sheep country."

"Yes," he acknowledged somberly. "There're miles of forage here that would fatten sheep and leave cattle starved. But some of it is good summer graze—for my cattle."

Her shoulders squared with a self-assuring gesture, as though to counteract the sudden, quick blinking of her eyes. "You're very angry, aren't you?"

He turned his pony's head. "So long, ma'am."

Passing through Winchester, Lee Cafferty saw Joe Stone's hipshot pony tied to the saloon's hitchrack. He angled easterly, after leaving town, and a half hour later rode up the timbered and brush-choked gulch in which Tom and Charlie Sims had built their shanty.

He found the brothers at their makeshift sawmill. They stood uneasy and fretful under Cafferty's stare, for they knew very well the reason for Cafferty's visit without his having to speak. A pair of fleshless hounds snarled at the horse's hind legs, but Cafferty held his pony reasonably still. He told Tom and Charlie:

"When the Harwell girl asked you two to build that sheep layout, you went to Nate Osprey with the news as fast as you could. You boys have been licking the dust off Osprey's and House's boots too long. Now I'm gonna tell you something, and you'd best remember it—don't ever step on my toes again."

When he drifted back through town, Joe Stone's horse was not in sight.

He kicked his pony to a fast canter along the wide floor of the Lost River, the bluff which began his own bench land rimming the valley far to the northwest. He reined off the main road long before he reached the bluff fork, taking the wagon trail which wound to Nate Osprey's headquarters buildings.

Without pause he passed over the yard directly to the hitchrack fronting the rambling stone-and-log house. Tied to the rail was Joe Stone's pony.

Cafferty's movements were unhesitating as he walked along the veranda to the screen door of the room Osprey used as an office; and, pausing only a moment to ascertain the room's occupants, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Osprey and Joe Stone were seated, and plainly caught off guard. In each man's hand was a small glass half filled with whiskey, the tall bottle setting on the desk. Cafferty was aware of Stone's immediate shift of his glass from right to left hand. Nate Osprey sat unmoving, the expression of startlement quickly fading to one of puzzlement.

Cafferty voiced quietly, "Nate, you gave Tom and Charlie Sims the signal to build the Harwell girl's sheep layout. They'd never have done that without your approval. But you made a mistake. I'm turning your own scheme against you. In payment for my loss, I'll be grazing stock on some of your foothill range."

Osprey's face hardened with swift anger. "You talk big, Lee. You've thrown your weight around the Lost River too long now. I think there'll be an end to that."

Cafferty's eyes swung to Joe Stone. "So you're going to make sure Stone earns his keep?" His quick smile was taunting, disdainful. "Who knows the sure ending of these things? Who knows when you'll scratch my hide once too often and I'll come looking for you?"

A long sigh came from Nate Osprey. He said nothing further.

CAFFERTY went out to his horse and rode back down the road. A quarter of an hour later, as he approached a grove of oak trees under which the road traversed, he caught the sound of brush-crashing over the rhythmic beat of his own travel. Instantly alert, he slowed his horse and peered down an avenue of solid shade. A horseman broke clear of the wall of trees and reined about to stand his pony in the middle of the road. The rider was Joe Stone.

The man had raced his mount in a circular route to come in on Lee Cafferty's

fore and, battle-wise, had placed himself in the deep shade. Cafferty, who was in the glaring sunlight, halted now. He stared for a moment, indecisively, down that shaded section where Joe Stone sat leather, flagrantly challenging his passage.

There is only one way to do this, he thought swiftly. His war cry sounded across the hot, still land and he jammed spurs into the horse's flanks.

The animal lunged forward from its standing start, clumps of dirt and the powder crust of the road flew in all directions. Joe Stone's shot crashed through the trees and Cafferty bore ahead, slipping into the margin of shade, his own gun raising. He saw Stone's horse break from its stance to lessen the interval between them rapidly; whether Stone's animal had done so from sudden fright or had been prodded by its rider, Cafferty did not know, and right now cared less. He was feeling wild and reckless, his whole being soaring with a fierceness and excitement hard to bear.

He pushed his first shot at Joe Stone's charging shape a moment before another shot of Stone's racketed through the trees. In that wild moment he didn't know if his shot had struck or whether he himself was hit. He kept thumbing the hammer and firing then, until he and Stone were mere feet from each other. Their wall-eyed ponies brushed so close that Cafferty's right leg jerked back from clipping Stone's stirruped foot. And he had a glimpse of the man's strained, tight-muscled face before they were rump to rump and pounding away from each other.

Cafferty, twisting in saddle, wheeled his horse and had the hammer of his gun back. He wanted to be deadly sure of this next shot because he knew there were not more than one or two cartridges left in the chambers. Yet there was no need for this worry. Joe Stone was out of leather in the dust of the road, face down and crawling with the feeble sickness of a wounded animal. And in moments he gave up the struggle and lay still, his life flowing out of him.

Cafferty murmured, "He lived the way he died, and this was his party." He rode on, and later crossed his bench land, heading steadily west and to the hills beyond.

Sari Harwell was taking the dried wash from a line when she noticed Lee Cafferty riding down from the timber. She stood very straight, the slight wind stirring her sun-burnished hair, and waited motionlessly till he closed the space between them. She was still standing that way when he halted his horse and smiled, tipping his stetson to her.

Pleasure was in his soft tone when he told her, "You can run your sheep through these hills with no harm from my quarter, or any other. I have made arrangements for my stock."

"Why, that's kind of you." She was quite surprised, her cheeks colored and warmth came out of her eyes to reach him.

"It would be my pleasure to look in on you every so often," Lee Cafferty said. "There are Saturday night doings in Winchester once in awhile. Maybe we could go there together sometime."

"Why, yes," she answered with a flash of spirit. "I would like that—like it very much."

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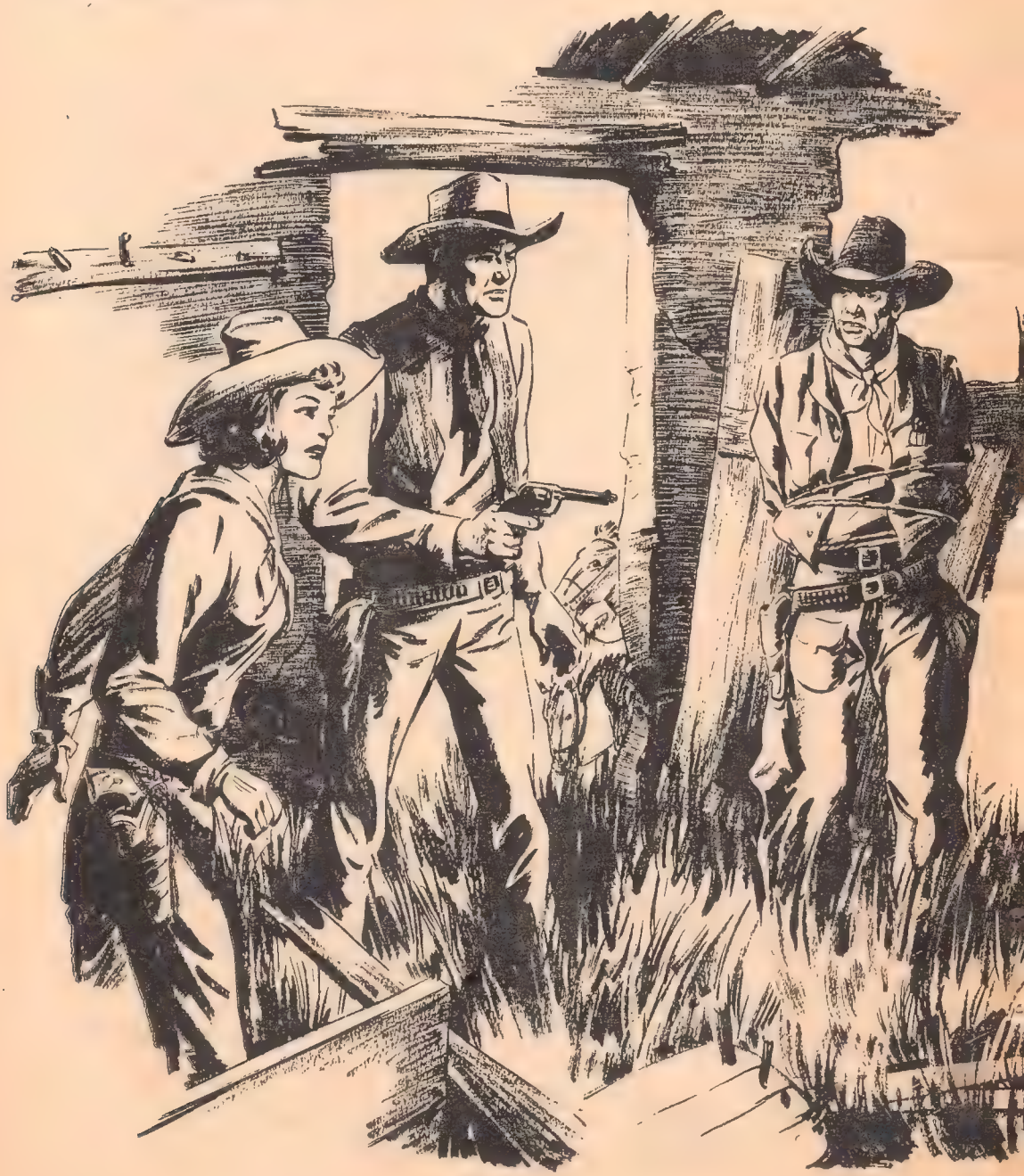

Tortugas

The son of the man he murdered came back to haunt Ezra Herkimer—and to take away his lovely daughter

ARMED men turned us back at the Kansas border. Too many armed men to fight. So we headed west with what was left of the herd and none of us knew what we would find to the west, or where we would stop. We traveled west for ten days, twenty, thirty. We came finally to a river and we crossed it, and beyond we found a wide, grass rich valley. A beautiful land bordered by pine covered hills and watered by several streams which fed into the river.

"Here it is," said Ezra Herkimer, nodding. "Here we will stay. We will live off the land, build up our herd. Someday a road will lead here from some town, and along that road we will drive our cattle to market."

"We'll probably find this land belongs to someone else," I said.

"No," said Herkimer. "It is mine. I claim it."

He drew his gun, scowled at it, then after a time dropped it back into its holster. He had turned thirty-five that summer, but to me he seemed older. He was a big man, tall, broad shouldered, bearded. There was iron in him, and a stubbornness he could never master. I hated him—I hated him because he was my uncle and because he had twice saved my life. I hated him because I was afraid of him, and because he knew it. I was fourteen.

We rode out across the valley the next day to see what it was like. I rode with Herkimer. The three other men in our outfit followed us. Here and there we passed small groups of cattle, all marked with a Double Arrow brand. At noon, we came to a point overlooking a wide, shallow creek bed, where we saw four adobe houses, and nearby, cultivated fields. People were working the fields. Men, women and children. A dozen all told.

"Mexicans," said Herkimer. "They'll give us no trouble."

We rode on, and we camped that night far across the valley in the shelter of tall pine trees. The next day we returned to the river through the upper end of the valley, and on the way saw another adobe house on the bank of a stream. A barn and a corral were near it, but we saw no people and we didn't stop.

"The finest cattle land I've ever seen," Herkimer told me that night. "Do you remember the hill I pointed out to you two hours back, Sam?"

I nodded.

"That's where I'll build my ranch house. It's the highest point in the valley. We'll sink a well for water, no matter how far we have to dig. A man should live on a hilltop."

"What about the Double Arrow cattle we saw?" I asked bluntly. "What about the ranch?"

"I saw no Double Arrow cattle," answered Herkimer. "I saw no ranch. Do I have to spell it out for you, Sam? I told you before, this is my range."

He touched his gun again as he said that. And I knew he meant it and that there was more trouble ahead. That night, I didn't sleep well. I wondered who owned the Double Arrow cattle and what my uncle would do about it. I was afraid I knew, and I was afraid I would show yellow again. I didn't have a stomach for fighting.

The next morning we learned who owned the Double Arrow. It was a man named Esteban Laros. He was a tall, thin, dark skinned Mexican. There was a pleasant smile on his face as he rode up to our camp just as we were finishing breakfast.

"Are these your cattle?" he asked, waving his hand to indicate the longhorns we had driven from Texas and which were fanning out into the valley.

"Yep. My cattle," said Herkimer.

"You are perhaps looking for a range?"

"Nope," said Herkimer. "I've found one. Here."

Esteban Laros shook his head. He still smiled, but the smile on his lips seemed tighter. "I'm sorry," he answered. "That cannot be. This land was my father's and it is now mine. It will someday belong to my son. But far beyond those hills to the west—"

He didn't get to finish the sentence. I heard the crack of Herkimer's gun. I saw the shocked look which came into the Mexican's face. I saw the hole in his forehead, made by my uncle's bullet. I saw his body relax, then tumble from the saddle to lie motionless on the ground.

Herkimer holstered his gun. He glanced at his three men. He was scowling, breathing hard. "Don't just stand there," he shouted suddenly. "One of you get a shovel, and dig a grave. And don't take all day about it." Then he looked at me and he asked, "Well, Sam? What have you got to say?"

"It was murder," I answered bleakly.

"He stood in my way," said Herkimer. "No one will ever stand in my way and live to talk about it. Remember that, Sam."

I didn't say a word. A chill ran over my body leaving it moist with perspiration. I told myself that someday I would have the courage to stand in Herkimer's way, yet I knew in my heart I wouldn't.

WE HAD a little trouble in the months which followed, but not as much as I had expected. There was no law in the immediate area. The men who had been employed by Esteban Laros didn't have much fight in them. After two had been shot down, the others fled. And the Mexicans in the settlement on what we named Lazy creek, took Herkimer's regulations without any show of argument. Laros's widow and his young son, disappeared. Where to, I didn't know. And I don't think my uncle did.

A year passed, and another. Ezra Herkimer built his ranch house on the hilltop he had pointed out to me, drafting the help he needed from the Mexican settlement on Lazy creek. He added to the cattle he had brought here, not only through their natural increase but by buying several herds driven west because of the quarantine line at Kansas. He hired more men. He build drift fences across the canyons at the north and west edges of the valley. And at the end of that second year he rode to Santa Fe and came home with a wife named Elizabeth.

She was beautiful. One of the most beautiful women I've ever known. But she lived only two years and died when Molly was born.

I was eighteen, then. I was tall, thin, and wiry, and a little more sure of myself than I had been when we had come here from Texas. I still hated my uncle. I had been on the point of leaving him when he brought Elizabeth home. I had stayed because of Elizabeth. I had loved her. I think I loved her more than Herkimer did. Now that she was dead, there was nothing more to keep me here. So one night, about a month after Elizabeth passed away, I told Herkimer that I was striking off for myself.

"Why?" he demanded bluntly.

"A man has to earn his own way."

"You're not a man, yet," snapped Herkimer.

"I can handle any job on the ranch," I said angrily.

"A lot more goes into being a man than the ability to handle a job," said Herkimer. "Your guts are still flabby."

"I don't hold with murder, if that's what you mean," I half shouted.

"I'd kill any other man who said that to me," growled Herkimer. "You don't like me, do you, Sam?"

I shook my head.

"You don't like me because of the violence you've seen in me," he continued. "Yet we came here up a trail where violence was the order of the day, where it couldn't be avoided. We are alive today because we were tougher than the men we met."

There was no point in continuing an argument like this, and I knew it. I held silent. And after a minute Herkimer asked me where I was going and I said I wasn't sure.

That ended our talk, but the next morning when I was ready to leave Herkimer came out in the yard and handed me a purse. It was quite heavy. I didn't want to take it.

"It's the wages you've earned," he told me. "Stow it in your pocket and use it sparingly. You'll need it. And after you've seen the world, come back. There will always be a place for you here."

I would never be back. That was one thing I was sure of. But I didn't say so, out loud.

"You're wearing a gun," he added. "I've taught you how to use it. If you run into trouble, don't be a fool. Shoot first and shoot the straightest."

"I'm wearing this gun for rattlesnakes," I said quietly.

"Some rattlesnakes," said Herkimer, "walk on two feet."

Those were our last words. The last we would ever speak to each other. Or so I thought at the time. But I was wrong though many a year would pass before we saw each other again.

Many a year. Some of them good, some

bad. I traveled north, drifted here and there. I held on to most of the money Herkimer had given me, and I added to it. I met a girl, one day, and though I rode on from where I met her, I couldn't get her out of my mind, so I turned back, and married her, and we bought a ranch up in the mountain country of Colorado.

Time ran on. I was thirty, then thirty-five, and then forty. On occasion, though not often, I wondered about Herkimer, and if he still held his valley, and what his life was like. But my curiosity didn't gnaw at me very hard until I was sent by the association as a delegate to a cattleman's meeting in Santa Fe. It wasn't too far from Santa Fe to Herkimer's valley. I half expected to run into my uncle at the meetings. I didn't, however. He wasn't there.

I MADE a number of inquiries about him among the New Mexico cattlemen at the meeting, and was finally directed to a man named Carl Duffield. I cornered Duffield after one of the meetings. He was a tall, gaunt, tired looking man, perhaps several years older than I.

"Herkimer!" he said in a hard voice. "Why are you asking me about Herkimer?"

"I knew him, years ago," I explained. "I worked for him as a kid."

Duffield's eyes widened in a sudden interest. His body stiffened. "Years ago?" he repeated. "Were you with him when he hit the Tortugas valley?"

"I came up the trail with him from Texas," I answered.

"Then you're just the man I want to see," cried Duffield. "Maybe you hold the key to the situation. There's a story about Ezra Herkimer I'd give half my ranch to prove. A story about the way he took the valley. About the murder of Esteban Laros."

I was instantly sorry for my curiosity. Sorry I had hunted up this man. I had no intention in the world in getting involved in any trouble down here.

"Tell me?" Duffield was asking. "Is the story true? Was Esteban Laros shot down as we've heard? Were you there? Did you see it? Tell me, man. I've got to know."

I remembered in detail how Esteban Laros had died. I knew exactly where he had been buried. It was something I would never forget. But I didn't want to break open the past.

"Hadn't you better explain what this is all about," I suggested. "Why have you got to know how Estaban Laros was killed? What's that got to do with your problem today?"

"If we had the facts, it would be a way to reach Herkimer," Duffield answered. "Nothing else will do. Nothing short of a range war and all the killing that goes with it."

"Why a range war?" I asked bluntly.

Duffield shrugged. He took a deep breath and seemed to get better control of himself. "You'd have to live down there along the Tortugas to understand," he said slowly. "There are other men, I know, who control ranches as large as Herkimer's. But such men must get along with their neighbors. Herkimer doesn't. I suppose that's the heart of the matter."

We spent the evening together and Duffield did most of the talking. His case against Herkimer could be added up in about this way. Herkimer held the finest land in the Tortugas valley, and held it illegally. He was wealthy and his political contributions had bought him favors at the government land office, so that no part of his ranch was open to settlement. He had a tough crew riding for him which had no respect for the law and their brawling gave the entire area a bad name. He operated alone, with no respect for the cattleman's association or what it tried to accomplish. He practically owned the bank in the town of Tortugas, and his loan policies were hard to take.

Those were the general charges. More specifically, he had run some Mexicans off of a settlement on his land about a dozen years before, shooting down those who had resisted. He had killed three men in senseless quarrels since the coming of the law, but had each time been

acquitted on self defense. And of course there was the old story of the murder of Esteban Laros.

"So he hasn't changed," I said finally. "He told me once no man would ever stand in his way."

"A few have tried it," said Duffield. "They didn't live long. Now what about Laros?"

I shook my head.

"You were the boy," said Duffield. "According to the stories we've heard, Herkimer reached the Tortugas with a herd of three hundred cattle and a crew of three men and a boy. The last of the three men who came here with him, quit him a dozen years ago, and like the other two, dropped from sight. But before he left he got drunk one night in the Mexican settlement. He was in love with a girl there. He told her how Laros was shot. He called it murder."

"And what if I called it murder?" I asked. "It would be only my word against Herkimer's. The word of a boy who ran away."

"We could still make a case out of it," said Duffie d.

I didn't agree and I told him so. But the next night, after our meetings were over, I sat in my hotel room, writing a letter to my wife, explaining that I would be two or three days late in getting home, that before I came back I wanted to take a short trip to the Tortugas valley. I meant it to be just that. I wasn't any crusader. I didn't mean to do anything. But in me there was a driving necessity to see for myself what the years had done, or hadn't done, to Ezra Herkimer.

TORTUGAS was on the river, several miles below the point where we had crossed into the valley almost a quarter of a century before. After I got there and signed up for a room in the hotel I remembered that Herkimer had once said the day would come when there would be a town nearby. And a road to drive his cattle to market. He had had his town and his road for a good many years. And he still held his valley.

Out on the porch of the hotel I looked up and down the town's one short street. An almost deserted street now in the late afternoon. Across from me was the sheriff's office and in the doorway stood a stocky, bald headed, middle aged man. I headed that way, nodded as I drew near him, and mentioned that Tortugas seemed to be a nice, quiet town.

"We try to keep it that way," said the sheriff. "Looking for work?"

"Not exactly," I answered.

"Land, then. You might try the bank. They've several places for sale."

"Foreclosures?"

"How should I know?" the sheriff replied.

"What about something up that way?" I asked, pointing to the north.

"Nothing up there," said the sheriff. "Everything up that way belongs to a man named Herkimer."

"The mountains, too?" I asked, grinning.

"Don't get funny, mister," said the sheriff, and the scowl on his face bit deeper. "I'm just telling you how it is."

Three men came racing their horses into town. They waved to us as they passed, then pulled up in front of the saloon and dismounted and looked back. Looked back curiously and stood for a moment in front of the saloon before they went in. I would have bet even money they had spotted me as a stranger in town.

"Some of Herkimer's riders?" I asked.

"Could be," nodded the sheriff. "Are you interested in Herkimer?"

"Why not?" I demanded. "That looks like nice country up there to the north."

"Nice country, but not open country," said the sheriff flatly. "If you're interested in land, talk to Carlson at the bank. No sense in a man wasting his time."

I nodded, and moved on. But I didn't stop at the bank. Instead, I headed for the corral and got my horse. Half an hour later I was up river, near the place where we had crossed into this valley so long ago. And where Esteban Laros had met his death, and had been buried.

There, I reined up. And there I sat my horse for a time, remembering those days and the days which had followed. The building of the ranch house on the hilltop, the digging of the well, the coming of Elizabeth, and her death. Elizabeth, my first love. For although she had been Herkimer's wife, I had loved with all the hopeless passion of my youth. I closed my eyes to picture her, then opened them again, aware of the sound of running horses, coming toward me from up river. And aware of the fact that I was back in the trees, but not deep. And that whoever was coming this way might see me and wonder what I was doing on Herkimer's land, half hidden in the trees.

A vague apprehension touched me. I loosened my holster gun and sat waiting, hoping the men headed this way wouldn't notice me. But I was almost sure they would. The cover where I had stopped was thin.

Two riders came into sight, following the growth of trees which bordered the river. A man and a girl. A tall, slender young man and a girl with sand colored hair. They saw me and pulled up. And almost instantly the man shouted, "Watch it, Molly." Then he wheeled his horse between me and his companion and his hand dropped down to his gun.

I raised my arms shoulder high. I kneed my horse forward. And I was aware of a sudden, shaky feeling, a sense of unreality. It was as though the years had fallen away, but had fallen away unevenly. These people I was riding toward weren't two flesh and blood people. They were two ghosts. The ghost of Esteban Laros and the ghost of Elizabeth.

"Who are you?" asked the man sharply and with only the trace of an accent in his voice. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

I DIDN'T answer him. I couldn't have spoken an answer. I stared from him to the girl, then at him again, then at the girl. Molly, he had called her, but her face had Elizabeth's features. The same clear, blue eyes, the high forehead, the patrician nose, the warm full lips. She looked sturdier than Elizabeth, had broader shoulders. But the general likeness was startling. And the man was Esteban Laros all over again. Tall, straight, dark skinned.

"What's the matter with you?" the man was asking. "Why are you looking at us that way?"

I found my tongue again. I even managed a smile. "You'll have to forgive me," I answered. "For a moment I was startled. Your companion looks exactly like Elizabeth, and you—"

"My name is Steve Moreno," said the man quickly—too quickly.

The girl leaned toward me, her eyes wider. "Elizabeth!" she cried. "That was my mother's name. But she died long ago. When I was born."

I nodded, aware of the sharp way Moreno was watching me. If that was his name, which I doubted.

"Did you know my mother?" asked the girl.

"Yes, I knew her."

"Then you must be—"

"Sam Ballard," I said.

The smile which came to Molly's lips was her mother's. She urged her horse closer, stretched out both hands to me and I took them. And held them for a moment.

"Sam Ballard," she cried. "Welcome home. Father's talked of you many times. He'll be anxious to see you." She turned to the man and added, "Steve, I don't know whether I've mentioned Sam Ballard to you or not, but he's my father's nephew. That makes him some sort of relative of mine."

Steve Moreno was equal to the occasion. A friendly smile showed on his face. He said, "Ballard, I can't exactly welcome you home, for I don't belong here. But if Molly's glad to see you, I'm glad you've come."

"He's going home with me, Steve," said Molly. "I'll meet you tomorrow afternoon. The usual place."

But I shook my head at that. "Not so fast. Where were you and Steve going?"

"We were just—riding."

"Then suppose we do this," I suggested. "You ride on into town alone. I want to talk to Steve. I'll join you in town, later, and maybe even ride out to the ranch with you."

"But why Sam?" cried Molly. "You and Steve don't even know each other. You've just met."

I glanced at Steve. He was still smiling but his smile had tightened, just the way Esteban Laros's smile had tightened before he died.

"I think we know each other," I said slowly. "I think Steve wants to talk to me as badly as I want to talk to him."

Molly looked quickly at Steve. Fright had jumped into her eyes. Her body had suddenly stiffened. It struck me then that Molly must know who Steve was. And that she was afraid of what might happen if she left us alone together.

But if that was true, she didn't reveal it. "I don't understand, Sam," she said, frowning. "Why do you want to talk to Steve? What do you want to talk about?"

I managed a laugh. "I'll tell you later, Molly. Or Steve will. We won't be long."

"No, we'll not be long," said Steve. "It's all right, Molly. I think I know why Ballard wants to see me."

It took a little more talking but finally Molly rode on toward town alone. A very puzzled girl, or a very worried girl. Or both. Steve and I watched her out of sight, neither of us speaking. I dug my pipe out of my pocket and lit it. Steve lit a cigaret.

"Well?" he asked finally.

"Your name is Laros," I said bluntly. "Esteban Laros."

He showed no surprise, nor did he deny it. Instead, he asked a question. He asked, "Are you sure, Ballard? You could be wrong, you know."

"I could be," I admitted. "But I'm not. You're almost an exact copy of your father."

"Then you knew my father. But how could you have known him?"

"I didn't know him," I answered. "I saw him only once. But I remember his face. I'll never forget it."

"How could you remember a face after so many years?"

"Perhaps because I was a boy at the time, and because some youthful impressions cut deep. Perhaps because it was at almost this exact spot that I saw him. And because I was remembering it when you and Molly rode up and when I first saw you."

STEVE moistened his lips. He leaned forward. "At this spot?" he whispered. "Then it was here he was murdered. You saw it."

There was no point in a denial. I nodded. "Yes, I saw it."

"Did it happen as they say? Did he have a chance?"

A sharp tension had come into Steve's body. He was still leaning forward, both hands clenched.

"Before I answer that," I said slowly, "suppose we talk about some other things. Suppose we talk about why you are here, how you happened to be riding with Molly, and why you have been calling yourself Steve Moreno."

"No," said Steve, straightening up. "Suppose we don't."

"Then I'll have to guess at the answers. Shall I put it this way, Steve. You grew up in the knowledge that Ezra Herkimer had killed your father. When you felt you were equal to it, you came here to avenge your father's death. That much is easy to figure. The rest I'm not sure of. Does Molly know who you really are?"

"We'll leave Molly out of this," said Steve, sharply.

"But we can't. I found you riding with her."

"I said we'd leave her out of it."

My pipe had gone out. I lit it again. Then I said, "Steve, I'd be willing to leave her out, but I can't, for you brought her into it, yourself. Did you think to reach Herkimer through his daughter? Is that your plan? Do you lack the courage to face Herkimer yourself?"

Steve's holster gun seemed to jump up into his hand. It lifted to cover me. A flush

of anger showed in the young man's face. "I could kill you for that," he shouted.

"But it would be rather foolish," I answered. "You would have to flee the country without finishing the job you came here to do."

The gun he was holding, wavered. He lowered it after a moment, and then holstered it. But he still looked angry.

I said, "Look here, if you're the son of Esteban Laros, can't you establish your legal right to this valley?"

"No. The records have been changed. Herkimer's money bought that."

"Have you seen him? Hasn't Molly invited you to the ranch?"

"No. Young men who might be interested in Molly aren't welcomed at Herkimer's ranch. A Mexican, in particular, wouldn't be welcomed. Next winter, Herkimer plans to take his daughter to Denver where she can meet more suitable men than are to be found around here."

An edge of bitterness had come into Steve's voice. And he was scowling. I nodded. I was now ready to make another guess, but I didn't make it out loud. Steve had come here to kill Herkimer, but before he could, he had met Molly and had fallen in love with her. And right now, unless I was mistaken, he was a badly confused young man. He was a boy old enough to think and to have plans, he must have looked forward to facing the man who had killed his father. But when he had come here to even the score, he had found a girl in the way.

"Where are you staying?" I asked him. "Have you a job somewhere? What is your excuse for hanging around?"

"I've been breaking horses for a man named Hammond who has a ranch down valley, not far from Tortugas."

"You work mornings, then, and have the afternoons and evenings, free. A nice arrangement."

"It has been. What are you going to do, Ballard? Tell Herkimer I'm here?"

"Or Molly. What should I tell Molly?"

Steve took a deep breath. "Let me tell her."

"When?"

"The next time I see her. Tomorrow afternoon."

I was silent for a moment. A hopeless, weary look had come into Steve's face. It was a look which anticipated what it would mean to him to tell Molly the truth. It was a look which accepted the shock it would be to her, and the way she would turn away from him, leaving him free to do what he had come here to do. I felt I could almost read his mind.

"You'd better ride on if you're going to meet Molly in town," he said flatly. "It's a long distance from town to Herkimer's ranch."

"And you?" I asked him.

"I'll keep down the river until I'm near Hammond's. Tomorrow I'll tell Molly who I am, why I came here. And after that—"

"Herkimer?"

"Yes, Herkimer."

"It's murder to shoot a man from ambush."

Steve straightened. "I'll not shoot him from ambush. I'm not afraid to face him. Whatever I am, I'm not a coward."

"Then promise me one thing," I suggested.

"What?"

"Don't rush things. Your father's been dead almost twenty-five years. A few more days of waiting won't be too long."

"A few more days," said Steve. "I'll wait that long."

But there was no lift in his voice, no sound of determination or of enthusiasm for what lay ahead. He stared at me for a moment, then wheeled his horse and rode away, heading down river.

MOLLY was waiting for me at the edge of town, and there was a tight and stubborn look on her face as I drew in beside her. I had never had such a look from Elizabeth. Molly was like her, yet I was discovering differences, and would see more. For some of Ezra Herkimer was in this girl. She wasn't only her mother's daughter.

"Where's Steve?" she demanded.

"On the way to Hammond's," I answered.

"What did you want to see him about?"

"He'll tell you tomorrow."

"But I want to know now."

I grinned and shook my head. I said, "Look here, Molly. Let's not spoil our evening. We won't have many together."

"Why?"

"Because I can't stay here long."

"Then you haven't come home?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Home to me now is a ranch in Colorado. I've a wife there, and two sons and a daughter. I've just stopped by here on a brief visit."

"I don't think I like that," said Molly. "I hoped you had come back here. At least, we can have supper in town, then ride to the ranch together."

"Your father won't be in town?"

"He seldom rides to town."

"But some of his men may be in town."

Molly laughed. "Undoubtedly. And they'll see us eating together and tell father I had supper with a handsome stranger. He'll be furious."

"Then you're not supposed to do such things."

"No."

"What about Steve?"

The girl sobered immediately. "Father doesn't know about Steve. I don't want him to know, Sam. Not for a while, please."

It had been easy to guess that Steve had fallen in love with Molly. And I wondered, now, if Molly didn't feel the same way about Steve. I sat watching her. She had turned her head away from me and was looking, probably, in the direction of the Hammond ranch. Her body wasn't so straight as it had been. Whatever nagging worries she had were making themselves felt.

We had supper together at the hotel. A slow, unhurried supper. I talked straight through it, but still managed to eat a good meal. Molly hardly touched her food, hardly seemed aware of it. She asked question after question about Elizabeth. And she hung on every word I said as though she was hungry for an understanding of her mother. Several times during the meal tears came to her eyes. Several times she laughed softly. And once she said, "You were in love with her, Sam."

"Yes, I was in love with her," I admitted.

"Did father know?"

"I doubt it. But it wouldn't have made any difference. I was sixteen when your father married her. Eighteen when she died."

We talked on and on, and everyone who came to the restaurant that night looked at us curiously. But that was to be expected in view of Molly's father and of the fact that I was a stranger. Toward nine we got our horses and started up the road toward Herkimer's ranch. Three men trailed after us. I looked back at them uneasily.

"Father's men," said Molly. "They'll probably stay right behind us all the way to the ranch. But they won't come any closer."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I've a temper," said Molly, laughing. "And they know it."

We rode on, talking for a while, then falling silent. One of the men behind us circled ahead, riding at a gallop, probably to carry word of what was happening to Ezra Herkimer.

But I gave little thought to that. Steve was on my mind. And on Molly's mind, too, for after a time she said, "Sam, you live in Colorado. Steve came here from Texas, two months ago. How did you happen to know him?"

I shook my head. "Why not ask Steve, tomorrow?"

Molly glanced at me, then looked ahead. "He didn't just happen to come here," she said slowly. "I mean, it wasn't by chance that he came here and went to work at Hammond's. He came here for some definite reason. I know that from thing he's said to me. Little things that slipped out when we were talking. Questions he asked shortly after I first met him. Questions which were more than plain curiosity."

I made no comment.

"WHEN you saw us this afternoon you looked startled," Molly continued. "You explained it by saying I reminded you of Elizabeth. You started to say Steve reminded you of someone. But Steve stopped you. If Steve reminded you of someone, it would have had to be someone who lived in the Mexican settlement on Lazy creek. Or it could have been—Esteban Laros."

"We're getting close to the ranch," I mentioned.

"The son of Esteban Laros," said Molly. "That's it, Sam. He would be about the right age. Have I guessed it?"

"Ask Steve," I said gruffly.

"I don't have to," said Molly quietly. "I've been worried, Sam. Worried about Steve. There's something bothering him. Eating at him like a disease. At times when we're together he looks at me with so much hopelessness in his eyes, I could scream."

"You see him often?"

"I'm in love with him, Sam. I'd leave here with him tomorrow if I could talk him into running away. He won't listen to me when I say things like that."

"What excuse does he give?"

"He says he doesn't believe in running away. But there's more to it than that, isn't there? He came here to kill father."

"Maybe not."

"But he did. And all because of a fight years ago between his father and my father. A fight which couldn't have been avoided."

"Your father told you about it?" I asked, frowning.

"Yes. And I've heard the other story, too. The story that father murdered Esteban Laros. But father's enemies tell many stories about him which aren't true."

I was silent again. What could I say now? Molly believed in her father in spite of what she had heard about him. She believed in her father just as I hoped my daughter would believe in me as she grew up.

"Sam," said the girl suddenly. "You could talk to Steve. You could tell him how it happened long ago when Esteban Laros was killed. That it was a fair fight and couldn't be avoided. You were there. You saw it. You could convince Steve that we shouldn't let it stand in the way of our happiness."

We had come to the hill on which Herkimer had built his ranch house, and were starting up it on the road which curved half around it to reach the top. I nodded to Molly. I said, "Yes, I can talk to Steve again." But I didn't know what good it would do. All I could see ahead for Steve and Molly was some kind of heartbreak.

Herkimer was waiting on the porch of the ranch house when we rode into the yard. I could see the indistinct outline of his figure. Another man stood in the shadows near the barn and two more were in front of the bunk house. A bunk house larger than the one I remembered.

Molly and I rode to the corral fence and there, dismounted, and tied our horses. The two men who had followed us pulled up at the edge of the yard. I was pretty well surrounded and it struck me as rather funny to get so much attention. But there really wasn't anything funny about it. Actually, here was a definite indication that the years hadn't worked much of a change on Ezra Herkimer.

"Father, you'll never guess who's with me," called Molly, as we approached the house.

"I'm waiting to hear," said Herkimer.

He had the same, deep grating voice I remembered.

I climbed the porch and faced him and Molly opened the door so that I stood in the light from the room. In its reflection I could see Herkimer more clearly. He was still a big man, heavy, broad shouldered, but his beard was gone. And the lines in his face were deeper. Deep and bitter. His face wasn't the face of a man who had found much satisfaction in life even though he still held his valley.

"Sam?" he said after a moment, and a little doubtfully.

"That's right," I nodded.

"You've changed some. Grown older, heavier. You stayed away a long time.

Longer than I expected. But just the same, welcome home."

He didn't put out his hand. We had never shaken hands. But in his voice was a trace of warmth which surprised me. It had never occurred to me that Herkimer had meant it when he had said I would always have a home here. Or that he had expected me to come back.

We went inside. A Mexican woman, his housekeeper, brought in coffee and pie and Herkimer, Molly and I sat and talked for an hour or more. Talked of the old days on the trail up from Texas, and of the early days in the valley when the house had been built, and the well dug, and when Elizabeth had been alive. But we skipped the harsh elements in what we remembered. The violence was glossed over.

"It's good to have you back again," said Herkimer. "I need you here, Sam."

I shook my head. "But I haven't come back. This is just a visit. Up in Colorado I've a place of my own."

"Not like this."

"No, not so large. But it's a good ranch. It keeps me busy."

"Sell it," said Herkimer.

"I've a family, too."

"Move them down here."

Again I shook my head. "We're happy up there."

"You could be just as happy here," said Herkimer. "We'll talk of it some other time."

A LITTLE while later we told Molly goodnight, and Herkimer walked with me to my room. A room filled with old memories. He sat on the edge of the bed for a time, seeming reluctant to leave, or to end the pleasant talk we had been having. And it struck me suddenly that Ezra Herkimer was lonely. Even with his valley and with Molly and with all his men, he had found no happiness.

"Molly's a fine girl," I said. "You should be proud of her."

"I am," replied Herkimer. "But I'm worried about her, too."

"Worried? Why?"

"She's beautiful, Sam. But she's still young, terribly young, and inexperienced. Someday, when I'm gone, she'll own all this valley, except your share."

"You can forget my share," I broke in.

"No, but about Molly. Even though she is young, she's a woman. I mean, she's of an age where she's interested in men. But there are no men around here for her. No men fine enough. I'm taking her to Denver in the fall. Maybe up there—"

"Molly strikes me as pretty sensible," I said, interrupting.

Herkimer shook his head. "She's not, Sam. I don't like to have to tell you this, but recently she's been sneaking away to meet a Mexican. A fellow named Steve Moreno. He's handsome enough, they tell me, but he's still a Mexican. God! My daughter and a Mexican. Think of it."

"There are some pretty fine Mexicans," I said mildly.

"Like hell there are. But I can handle this Steve Moreno. And I will. The plan's all set up."

"You'll handle him as you did Esteban Laros? And the Mexicans on Lazy creek?"

"Why not?" asked Herkimer, jerking to his feet. "What else can I do? You haven't changed, have you, Sam? Your guts are still flabby."

"And murder is still murder."

Herkimer crossed to the door. He stopped there and looked back at me, his eyes slate hard. "Maybe it's a good thing you've got that ranch up in Colorado," he murmured. "You wouldn't last long here in the valley."

With that, he went out and closed the door. And I stood staring at it, wondering what plan he had set up to handle Steve. And how Molly would take it. Or what could be done to stand in the way. Then I told myself that this wasn't any of my business, but saying that didn't make me feel any better, or didn't help me to get to sleep.

The next morning, early, I met Herkimer's crew. Fifteen men, most of them thirty or better. Hard looking men. Competent. I could be sure of that. They wouldn't have been here if they weren't.

I was introduced to them at breakfast in a dining hall which had been added to the ranch house since I had left here. I looked them over and they looked me over. I drew a couple of friendly smiles, but no more.

"I've three more men working the hills. Stray men," said Herkimer. "We have five line shack barns where we store hay for winter feeding. Make a guess at my tally."

"Five thousand," I said, deliberately putting the figure low.

"Double it and then add some," Herkimer answered. "We have quite a spread, Sam. It keeps me busy. A few years back some of the men from the lower valley tried to get me to join the association. Hell, I'm an association by myself."

His foreman, a tall, gaunt man named Kyle, sent most of the crew off on various assignments, then waited on the porch until we came out. He drew Herkimer aside and said something to him in a voice too low to reach my ears. But I caught Herkimer's explosive answer.

"To hell with waiting any longer to pick him up. Go after him if you have to ride to Hammond's front door and drag him away. Take him to Mex-town, and send me word."

Kyle was scowling. He said something else.

"What if Hammond doesn't like it," snapped Herkimer. "He won't kick up a fuss over a Mexican. If he does, we'll slap him down."

Kyle shrugged, nodded, and then turned away. I watched him walk to where three other men were waiting. The four rode off together, heading toward town.

"Was that about the man you mentioned last night?" I asked Herkimer.

He looked at me rather sharply. And after a moment he said, "Sam, you told me last night you were here on a visit. Let's keep it that way."

I didn't push the matter. I let it drop. But from what I had heard it wasn't hard to figure out what Herkimer was planning. His men had been trying to pick up Steve Laros, but hadn't succeeded. Today they were really going after him. They would ride to Hammond's and drag him away. They would take him to Mex town, wherever that was, and hold him there for Herkimer.

HERKIMER went back into the house but I stayed out on the porch and after a little while, Molly joined me. She looked fresh, and rested, and her smile was warm enough to make my heart beat faster.

"I wish you were staying here, Sam," she told me. "I honestly do."

"Is that because you may be leaving, running away with Steve?" I asked, grinning.

"That's part of the reason," she said soberly. "But if things worked out so that I stayed here, it would still be nice to have you. Father doesn't have anyone he can talk to, anyone he feels close to, as he could with you."

Herkimer and I would never feel close to each other, but there wasn't any reason to say so. "Where's Mex town?" I asked.

"Mex town?" said Molly. "That's the name men have given to an old, deserted settlement on Lazy creek. Long ago, several families lived there. But they moved out, went somewhere else. It seems our cattle were always getting into their fields, destroying their crops. They didn't have the industry to fence their lands. It was easier to move."

So that was the story Herkimer had told Molly. I had heard a different story from the man to whom I had talked in Santa Fe. A more likely story. But a dozen years ago, when the Mericans had been run off or had left, Molly had been just a young girl, and undoubtedly had heard what Herkimer wanted her to hear.

"When do you meet Steve?" I asked.

"At two o'clock."

"Where?"

"Over on the river. Not far from here."

"What do you do if he's late? Wait for him?"

"He's never late," said Molly, smiling.

I had an idea he would be late today, that he wouldn't make it at all, and I

stood silent for a minute, figuring out distances and time. The men who had left here, headed toward town, could make it there by eleven, and to Hammond's by noon if Hammond's wasn't far below Tortugas. In returning with their captive I could be pretty sure they would swing wide of town. It was doubtful if they could reach the old Mexican settlement before three o'clock. After that, someone would ride here with a message for Herkimer.

"What's bothering you, Sam?" asked Molly.

"Just this," I said slowly. "I'd like to see Steve again. Can I go with you this afternoon?"

Her answer came without the least hesitation. "Certainly, you can. We'll have to leave here by one."

"And we won't be followed?"

"I practically live on a horse," said Molly. "No one ever asks where I'm going when I ride off. No man working here would dare to follow me."

That might be true, but someone had seen Molly and Steve together, and had told Herkimer. It was probably known she rode off to meet him. Herkimer could have caught him through following her. But he wouldn't have wanted to do it that way. He wouldn't have wanted to face Molly's anger, or her possible defiance. A better plan was to pick up Steve when Molly wasn't around. And to have Steve disappear.

I rode off with Molly right after dinner. Herkimer and several of his men saw us leave, but no one followed us. We came to the river, and turned down it to the clearing in the trees where Steve and Molly had been meeting. She expected him to be there, waiting, but he wasn't. And he hadn't come by two thirty.

"Suppose we ride to meet him," I suggested.

"But we might miss him that way," said Molly. "There's a long stretch down stream where the trees spread out almost a mile wide. Steve never comes the same way twice."

"I didn't mean we'd ride down stream to meet him," I answered.

Molly caught her breath, stiffened. I could feel her eyes searching my face. She said, "Sam, you know something. What is it?"

"He's not coming here, Molly," I said bluntly.

"What did you say to him yesterday?"

"It was nothing I said to him, Molly. Your father has learned you were seeing him. This morning he sent four men to pick up Steve and take him to Mex town. If Steve had escaped them, he would be here."

"I don't believe it," cried Molly.

"Don't you Molly?" I asked. "Look at it as your father did. Your father didn't hear that his daughter was meeting a man named Steve. He heard his daughter was meeting a Mexican. His daughter's too good for a Mexican."

"But Steve isn't just a Mexican."

"Your father hasn't met him."

WE HAD dismounted and had tied our horses nearby. We had been sitting down, but now were standing. Molly's face showed the strain she was feeling. The strain of uncertainty with regard to her father, for surely she must have wondered at some of the stories she had heard about him. She must have had her doubts. And those doubts were driving at her now. Overwhelming her. She turned suddenly toward her horse, pulled the reins free, and scrambled into the saddle. In another moment she was tearing away, across country, angling toward Lazy creek. I was racing after her.

We hit Crazy creek above the old Mexican settlement, and at any insistance, we pulled up there in the trees, and dismounted, and tied our horses. Then, on foot, we headed down stream until we were close to what was left of the old adobe buildings.

I remembered my first glimpse of this settlement. Then, there had been tilled fields in the meadows on both sides of the creek, but those fields had now gone back to grass. There had been people in the fields, clothes on a clothesline, and four

adobe buildings. The buildings were all that remained. The doors were gone, the roofs might have fallen in, but the sturdy, thick, adobe walls were still standing, and would be standing after another quarter of a century unless torn down by hand.

Someone was here. We were immediately sure of that. Log tied near one of the abobe houses were three saddled horses. I had expected to see four. Four men had gone for Steve. With Steve, five would have come here. Send one as a messenger to Herkimer, and four would be let. But there were only three horses. Somewhere, a man had been lost.

Molly gripped my arm. "That bay horse," she whispered. "The one at the far end. It's Steve's."

I nodded, but said nothing. What we were going to do now, I didn't know. In a little while, Herkimer would be here. Maybe in five minutes, maybe in half an hour. Or maybe it would be longer. In the back of my mind was the notion that Molly's presence might keep Herkimer from doing anything rash. And it would, on the spot. But Herkimer didn't like to be balked by anyone. He had never let anyone stand in his way. It would be like him to agree to something Molly might ask, send her away, then do as he originally had planned.

"I'm going up there," said Molly. "I'm going to walk right in. I'm not afraid of the men who work for father."

A good plan, maybe. Herkimer's men wouldn't dare to harm Molly. And they might hesitate about jumping me. But just walking up and joining them would not solve anything.

I said, "Molly, if we walk up there and find Steve and two of your father's men, as I suspect we will, I'm going to pull the teeth of the two men who work for your father."

"You mean—"

"I mean I'm going to take their guns and tie them up."

"But when father gets here—"

"Your father ordered this, Molly," I said harshly. "We're not up against something which can easily be settled. Do you really think your father will let you ride off with Steve Laros?"

"He might let Steve go."

"Is that what you want?"

"No. I want to go with him."

"And you think your father will stand for that?"

Molly took a deep breath. She shook her head. There were tears in her eyes.

I said, "All right, Molly. We'll walk up there. But while we're doing it and after we get there, do some straight and hard thinking. The decisions you'll be making today, you won't be able to change tomorrow."

We left the trees and started forward. I had loosened my holster gun. I didn't anticipate too much trouble with the men who were guarding Steve Laros. Molly's appearance would startle them, knock them off balance. They would be afraid to stand too much in her way, afraid of what she might report to her father. And they would be afraid to pull their guns on the man who had been introduced to them as Herkimer's nephew.

We got almost to the adobe house near the horses before we were seen. Then, a short, stocky, middle aged man appeared in the doorway, saw us, and grabbed his gun but didn't lift it.

"Art!" he shouted. "Art, come here, quick!"

Another man joined him. A tall, thin, sour looking man. Together they filled the doorway, blocked it.

"Art, I'm coming in," said Molly. "I mean it. Stand aside. You, too, Dave Preston."

Art backed a step away, but Preston didn't. He glanced sharply at me, then looked at Molly, and shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Miss Molly," he said. "But you can't come in here. You'd better wait outside until your father arrives. He should get here pretty soon."

"I'm coming in, Dave," said Molly. And she drew her gun. It was a pearl handled gun, a pretty thing. Ornamental—but it could kill a man. She lifted it and pointed it straight at Dave Preston and her arm didn't show the sign of a quiver.

"Move out of the way, Dave," she ordered. And there was a sharp anger in her voice, a touch of the driving will of her father.

PRESTON gnawed at his lips. Perspiration showed suddenly on his forehead. He didn't want to give in to a girl, but he did, mumbling something or other to the effect that Herkimer wouldn't approve of what she was doing.

But Molly didn't seem to hear him. As Preston stepped out of the way she holstered her gun, and moved forward, through the doorway. I followed her, stopping just inside of what had once been a room.

The flat roof of the building was gone, had fallen in long ago. The windows were out. Grass grew from what had once been a hard, earth packed floor. Over to one side I saw Preston and Art, watching me uneasily. Molly was just ahead of me, but she had caught sight of Steve who was lying on the ground. She shouted his name and rushed toward him. She dropped on her knees at his side. I suppose it was natural that Preston and Art should look that way for a moment. But it was a mistake that they did. When they looked back at me, my gun was out, covering them.

"That's it. Nice and steady," I ordered. "And get your hands up higher."

Their hands went up. Preston muttered some bitter profanity under his breath. Art joined in.

"Get their guns, Molly," I said. "You can take care of Steve in a minute."

But Molly was in no hurry to help me. There was blood on Steve's face to worry about. And his arms and legs were tied and he had to be cut free.

I waited, still covering the two men. And in the end, it was Steve Laros who took their guns and then bound them, getting a rope from one of the horses outside. His face was swollen around the nose, one eye was almost closed, his lip was cut. It was easy to see he hadn't accompanied these men without first putting up a fight.

"Now, it's time to do some talking, isn't it?" I said, after Herkimer's men had been tied up.

Steve Laros turned to face me. He nodded. Molly came up to join him. She touched his arm, whispered his name, but he didn't even glance at her.

"Herkimer will be here in a minute," I told them. "You can wait for him, Steve, and face him. Or you can run. Or both you and Molly can run. You don't have much time to make up your mind."

"I'll run," said Steve bleakly.

"And never come back?"

"No, I'll never come back."

"Herkimer is the man who murdered your father. Have you forgotten that?"

"No. But Molly is in front of him. And will always be there."

It was the decision I had expected him to make. The only decision he could have made if he was really in love with Molly. "You'd better get started," I said bluntly.

"No," said Molly. "We had better get started. I'm going with him, Sam."

"No, Molly," said Steve.

"But I am."

"You can't." His voice was firm.

"Why can't I" Molly asked.

They had turned to face each other and I'm quite sure they had forgotten I was there, or that that two of Herkimer's men were lying not ten feet away, listening to all they said.

"It just isn't practical," said Steve.

"You mean you don't want me?" asked Molly.

"Never that. It's just—do you know who I am, Molly?"

"You're Steve Laros."

"Do you know why I came here?"

"You came here to kill my father."

"You still would go with me, knowing that?"

There were tears in Molly's eyes. She nodded. She said, "Yes, Steve. I still would go with you."

"I have no ranch like this to take you to."

"That's not what I care about," said Molly.

She stepped forward, her arms lifting,

and Steve didn't have a chance against her. He stood there, holding her close. He had straightened a little. His lips had tightened. His eyes had narrowed thoughtfully. He wasn't holding only a girl in his arms, but a responsibility he wouldn't be able to put down. The same was true of Molly.

I TURNED toward the doorway. It occurred to me that we had spent enough time here, and that we would be wise to leave while we could. But it was already too late for that. As I reached the doorway I heard the sound of drumming hoofbeats and looking up creek, wide of the trees, I saw Ezra Herkimer driving forward.

He was alone. I could at least be thankful for that. But then, he hadn't expected to be alone. He had expected to find Art and Preston here to help him, if he needed any help. I looked back into the room. Steve and Molly had also heard the sound of Herkimer's horse. They had stepped apart and were looking at me anxiously.

"It's father?" asked Molly in a whisper.

I nodded. "Yes, it's your father."

She looked quickly at Steve. She said, "Steve, you won't—"

"No, Molly," Steve answered.

"Maybe if I talk to him, he'll listen," said Molly. "I'll make him listen."

"It'll work out all right," said Steve. But there was a flat and hopeless sound in his voice, as though he knew just what to expect from Herkimer. As though he knew that nothing that Molly said would make any difference.

I again looked up valley. Herkimer was quite close, now. Close enough so that I could see the tight, scowling, bitter look on his face. It came to me abruptly that what I was doing was none of my business, but another thought swept that one aside. I had come here with Herkimer, long ago. I had stood by while he murdered Esteban Laros. I had been only a boy at the time, and I couldn't possibly have prevented it. Yet through the work I had done I had helped Herkimer gain his hold on this valley. Then I had gone away.

But I had never felt good about the years I had spent with my uncle. I had never declared myself. When I had seen him the night before he had looked on my return as a homecoming. Perhaps I did have a responsibility here. A responsibility to myself.

Herkimer pulled up, and while still on his horse, recognized me. I could see the shock of that recognition hit him, but not with any fear. There was more annoyance in the look which crossed his face. He swung to the ground and as he tied his horse near the other horses, I drew and lifted my holster gun.

"No, Sam. Not that way," called Molly, hoarsely.

"Keep Molly away from the door, Steve," I said without looking around. "There's only one way I know of to make Herkimer listen."

"You don't have to do this, you know," said Steve.

I made no answer to that. I was watching Herkimer. He finished tying his horse and straightened. He took a step forward, then saw my gun, and stopped, his body suddenly rigid. And he stood there for a moment. A big man, powerfully built, his legs spread slightly apart, his right wrist brushing his holstered gun. The gun he could whip up so quickly and fire so accurately.

"What's all this foolishness, Sam?" he asked finally. "Put that gun away."

I shook my head. "No, Herkimer. And I'll use it if you come even one step closer."

His eyes had narrowed. I don't think he was at all alarmed by the gun in my hand, but my presence here must have puzzled him and he probably wondered what had happened to Art and Dave and the man they had been guarding.

"Where's the Mexican?" he asked suddenly.

"Inside," I answered. "Molly's with him."

"Molly!" Herkimer shouted. "You had the nerve to bring Molly here?"

He started forward. I squeezed the trigger of my gun and my shot scraped

his shoulder, or at least tugged at the shoulder of his coat.

"No closer, Herkimer," I cried. "No closer! My next shot will be dead center."

He had stopped again. He was staring at me in wide eyed amazement. I don't think he believed I would have the will to use my gun.

"Just stand where you are," I added. "Molly wants to talk to you." And then I said, "Molly, come on out."

She did, but not alone. Steve was with her. They moved past me and stepped to one side, so that Herkimer, and I, and Molly and Steve formed a close triangle.

"Father," said Molly. "Father, I want you to meet Steve Laros."

IT DID not hit him immediately. He didn't recognize Steve as I had done. I suppose that to Herkimer, Steve was still just a Mexican who had dared to fall in love with his daughter.

"Come over here, Molly," he ordered. "Climb your horse and go home."

"No, father," said Molly.

"Did you hear me?" roared Herkimer. "I told you to come over here, climb your horse and go home."

"I heard you," said Molley. "You don't have to shout."

"Then do as I said."

"No, father. I'm going with Steve. We're leaving here together. We'll not be coming back."

Her voice was quiet, but firm. She reached for Steve's hand and Herkimer couldn't have helped but see it. An almost dazed look came into his face. He shook his head slowly from side to side. But gradually his moment of disbelief passed and his eyes settled on Steve's face and his body stiffened again.

"Laros," he muttered. "Steve Laros. So that's it. But what I did to your father, I can do to you."

"Not this time, Herkimer," I said sharply. "Keep your hand away from your gun."

He looked at me again. He took a deep breath and for a moment, was silent. Then he shook his head. "Sam, don't stand in my way. Not even you can stand in my way."

"Steve," I said. "Molly. You'd better go before someone rides up here."

I didn't look at them. I didn't dare. I don't know what kind of expression was in Molly's eyes. Herkimer held my full attention. His right arm had lifted a little. His fingers were brushing his holstered gun. And I knew, suddenly, that he was going to gamble. In spite of being covered, in another moment he would grab for his gun and whip it up at me.

Perhaps it was in his mind that I would hesitate for just an instant. But I didn't. Herkimer's arm moved. His gun lifted, and I fired. He jerked a little and his gun slid from fingers no longer strong enough to hold it. A bullet in the arm will do that to a man. Paralyze his fingers. Make them useless.

Molly uttered a startled cry. She took a step toward him, but I shook my head. "No, Molly. He isn't badly hurt. If you and Steve meant it, ride while you can."

Herkimer turned to look at them. "You can't ride far enough or fast enough," he said bleakly. "This is your last chance, Molly. Go home."

"No, father," said Molly. "I'm going with Steve."

She stepped back and took Steve's arm. She stood there, facing her father, her body as stiff and as straight and as proud as Herkimer's had ever been. The stubbornness of her will a match for his.

She wasn't smiling, but Steve was. And it was almost a friendly smile he showed the man he had come here to kill. "Don't worry about us, Herkimer," he said quietly. "I've a place to take her. A place you will never find. A place where she'll be happy." Then he looked at me and said, "What about you, Ballard?"

"I'll be riding on later," I answered.

"Thanks, Sam." said Molly.

A moment after that they mounted two of the horses, and rode away. Once they looked around and waved. I waved back. Herkimer didn't.

FINALLY it began to grow dark. No one else had shown up at the old Mexican settlement. Inside the roofless adobe building where Steve had been held, Art and Dave Preston were bound up. Herkimer and I sat outside. I had bandaged Herkimer's arm, a service he had permitted in grudging silence.

We had said hardly a word to each other since Steve and Molly had left. What thoughts were in Herkimer's mind, I didn't know. But they couldn't have been pleasant.

Mine were. I had a feeling that Steve and Molly would make a go of their life together. And I felt better about myself. I had finally stood up to Herkimer, or more properly, had stood firm in my own belief. I had wiped out some of the uneasy memories of my boyhood. Herkimer's threat to follow Steve and Molly didn't worry me too much. Steve and Molly were getting a good start and would have a better one. Herkimer's wounded arm would tie him down for a long while. He might even lose it. My bullet had shattered the bones just below the elbow.

As the shadows thickened, I got to my feet and told Herkimer I was leaving. "When I'm gone you can untie the men inside," I said. "Then if I were you, I would head for town and get that arm taken care of."

"A doctor won't be able to do much for my arm," said Herkimer, bitterly. "You could just as well have killed me."

I wondered if he was looking ahead. I wondered if he was already anticipating the loss of this valley he had held. He had kept it only by his gun.

I said, "Goodby, Herkimer."

He stood up. And then he said a strange thing He said, "Sam, stay with me here in the valley. There's no sense in riding away. It's a good valley."

"But it wouldn't work out, Herkimer," I answered. "We don't think alike. We don't believe in the same things."

"No, I suppose we don't," he said slowly. "No, it wouldn't work out."

He sat down again and stared at the ground, his shoulders sagging. A bulky, motionless figure. A powerful man, but a man who was very much alone. A man to be envied for his wealth and for his holdings, but a man much poorer than the Mexicans he had driven from this settlement. A man whose life had been framed in violence, and would be to the end.

An end that was close. For he wouldn't change. He would still go his own way in a world where men have to work with others. He would still make his own laws in a world where all must submit to laws for the common good. He belonged to the past.

I stared at him for a while but couldn't think of anything to say. So I walked away, heading up stream to where I had left my horse.

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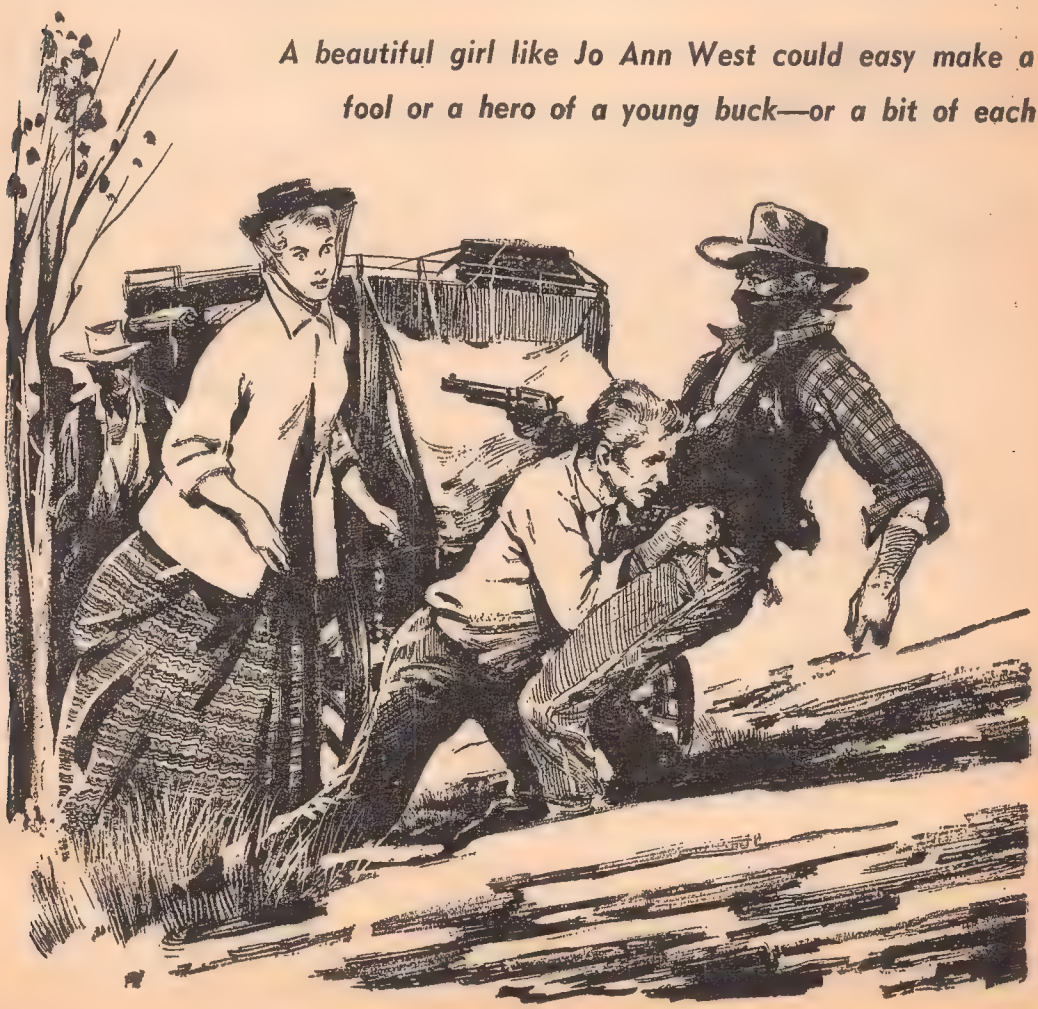
WOMAN-SHY

By J. L. BOUMA

WHAT made Tod Dunn low in mind that spring afternoon, was the fact that this was the last week of school, and that all summer long he would be denied the painful pleasure of stopping to pick up Miss Jo Ann West, the young and pretty teacher.

Tod, a tall, thin young man with a sun-baked, bony face, drove the stage between Ayer and Lamport. At four in the afternoon, Monday through Friday, he stopped his six-horse team in front of the country school and climbed down and opened the coach door for Miss Jo Ann. She always had a cheerful word and a smile for Tod, and the sight of her brightened his day. At times, when the weather was exceptionally nice, or when it happened that he had a full load, she would sit beside him on the Concord's high seat for the short ride to Lamport, where she boarded. To be so close to her was almost more than

A beautiful girl like Jo Ann West could easy make a fool or a hero of a young buck—or a bit of each



Tod could bear, but he tried never to show this. For his was a remote and humble love, and he was ever shy of exposing his personal feelings.

She was waiting as usual that afternoon, and as Tod stopped the stage he wished she would sit with him, for then maybe he could nerve himself to ask her to the Saturday night church dance. But the day was on the chilly side and only three passengers shared the coach—a young Army lieutenant, a hardware drummer and a man named Andrew Mellert, who was part owner of a mine in the Rincon Hills. Tod guessed that this just wasn't his lucky day.

He climbed down and regarded her shyly.

"It's cold," he said.

She chuckled softly and glanced at the small gold watch that she wore on the lapel of her coat. She was a slender, blond girl with a freckled nose and dimpled cheeks. "Tod, you're always right on time. And yes, it is sort of chilly."

"For this time of year, anyway."

An idiotic thing to say, he thought. It beat all how a man who could handle himself in a rough-and-tumble fight with the best of them, could turn so blame shy around a girl like Miss Jo Ann.

As far as he was concerned, she knew everything that had ever been written in the books, and then some. And though she was often withdrawn and serious, there'd been times when she had shown herself to be friendly as a kitten. These very changes of mood flustered Tod; it seemed to him there was something strange and wonderful about her that he could never quite reach. He cleared his throat as she looked at him with a pensive smile.

"Well, three more days and I'll be leaving Tod. I'll miss the children." She paused, she regarded him soberly. "And I guess I'll miss having you stop by for me."

Tod shifted his feet and said awkwardly, "Will you be coming back to teach next fall?"

She said slowly, "It depends—well, on a number of things."

"I sure hope you come back," Tod said, and hid his confusion by opening the door for her.

The lieutenant leaned down and took her arm at once, smiling broadly. "Permit me, miss," he said, and helped her inside with a flourish. She gave him a dazzling look of thanks, and they were talking cheerfully as Tod climbed back to the seat and drove on.

Now why couldn't he be as bold as that lieutenant? he asked himself morosely. He had a button on his lip around Miss Jo Ann, that was for sure. Around most women, for that matter—unless they happened to be eight or eighty.

The horses broke into a gallop with a jingle of harness. Five miles to Lampert, and Tod knew every chuckhole and rut in the sandy road. This tail-end of his run was peaceful at best. That was why, when he saw the two riders walking their horses up the Boulder Grade, he had no idea that they meant trouble. He took them to be a couple of desert riders and didn't give them another thought until the road steepened and he broke his own horses down to a walk. Then he glanced toward the riders with the thought that he very likely knew them.

BUT though their backs were still toward him, he saw at once that they were strangers. The next instant they swung around and he noted with a grunt of surprise that the lower half of their faces were covered with bandanas, that their hat brims were pulled low over their eyes, and that both their pistols were pointed directly at his chest.

"Stop and set your brake," the taller one said in a muffled voice. "Then climb down and grab sky or get a bullet in the gizzard." The voice sounded jumpy, as though the owner wasn't quite sure of himself.

"Well, I'm damned," Tod said, for he was still more surprised than angry. "You fellows are gonna have skinny pickings, seeing as how I'm not carrying a pay load, or mail."

"Get down here pronto!" the shorter man snapped, and then both men swung out of their saddles. Tod set his brake and climbed down over the wheel, thinking they were pretty green at their business, for experienced bandits would have left their horses tied in the brush.

The taller one of the two opened the coach door and told the passengers to step out, raise their hands and face away from the road next to Tod. The drummer stepped down blinking stupidly. Mellert followed, scowling. Then the lieutenant helped Miss Jo Ann down, and Tod noted with relief that she was pale but composed.

"If you two think—" Mellert began testily. But the tall outlaw interrupted him.

"Be quiet and damn still while we go through your pockets. Make a wrong move and you'll get hurt."

"If you think he's bluffing, just start something," the small outlaw growled.

Lined up with the others, Tod tried to see what he could of the two men. They were dressed no different from the average desert rider—worn and dusty boots, faded jeans and cotton work shirt. Both wore canvas brush jackets.

If there was anything at all unusual about them, it was the fact that they were jumpier than they should have been. The small outlaw did a hurried, careless job of going through Tod's pockets, as though he didn't expect to find anything in them to begin with. Tod was relieved when the fellow overlooked his lucky gold piece, that he always kept in his watch pocket. He guessed they were saddle tramps down to bedrock, and that they had very likely decided to hold up the stage at the last minute.

The small outlaw was doing all the collecting, putting the loot in a canvas bag he'd taken from under his jacket, while the other bandit kept them covered from behind. Tod wasn't wearing a gun, for it was a company rule that their drivers were never to go armed. The only time he had a shotgun guard along was when he carried mail or other valuables.

He didn't think any of the passengers packed a gun, either. Not on their person, anyway. Just as well, Tod decided. A jumpy man was a dangerous man, and he did not want to pack a dead or wounded passenger into Lamport.

Miss Jo Ann gave a sudden sharp cry of anger, and Tod saw that the small bandit had jerked the small watch from her lapel.

She stepped toward him, face pale and set. "You give that back! It's been in the family for years, and no dirty little—"

The small bandit swore and slapped her heavily in the face. Rage swarmed all through Tod and exploded in his brain. Ignoring the outlaw's initial warning to stand quiet and still, he lunged forward. The bandit dodged and struck him brutally with the barrel of his gun. The blow drove Tod to his knees, and his world was still reeling when two shots roared above him. Miss Joe Ann screamed. Tod rose unsteadily to his feet and saw Andrew Mellert arch forward, a shocked look of agony on his face, and fall at the side of the road.

As Miss Jo Ann screamed again, the outlaws jumped aboard their horses and galloped out of sight across the rim of the grade.

Tod dropped to his knees beside Mellert and saw the two bullet holes in the man's coat. Little wisps of smoke came from the scorched cloth, attesting to the fact that the tall outlaw had practically jammed the muzzle of his gun into Mellert's back before he fired. Tod looked at the stunned faces around him. Miss Jo Ann was sobbing.

"They didn't have to kill him. He was right next to me and he didn't move once. Why did they kill him?"

"The driver made a jump for the little guy," the drummer said in a shaky voice. "Maybe the tall one meant to shoot him and got the wrong man."

"That's foolish," Tod said shortly. "I was six feet from Mellert—he couldn't have been aiming at me."

They were all silent for a moment, looking at each other and at the dead man, each one trying to figure out what had

gone wrong.

"Did they empty his pockets?" Tod asked finally. "Did they clean the rest of you out?"

It seemed not. The small bandit had overlooked the lieutenant's watch as well as the drummer's money belt. And Miss Jo Ann's handbag hadn't been touched, though this was probably due to the fact that she had left it in the coach.

"Well, let's get him inside," Tod said. "Miss Jo Ann, you're welcome to sit with me, if you like."

She gave him a grateful smile. After Mellert's body had been lifted inside, Tod helped Miss Jo Ann to the box. Then he took a last look around to see if they were leaving anything behind. Something about Mellert bothered his mind, but pain still clawed inside his skull, and he couldn't think clearly. Maybe he would figure it out by the time they reached town, he thought, and climbed to the high seat and reached for the lines. . . .

SHERIFF BEN K. LANE, luckily, was at the depot when Tod stopped his horses out front. A crowd collected as two deputies carried the body to the undertaking parlor.

The sheriff herded Tod and the passengers to his office. He was a stout man of sixty, who had been a law officer most of his life and had settled down to the final haul in Lamport County. It was a quiet county at best, and he liked it that way. Now its peace, as well as his own, had been disturbed, and it upset him. He looked at the passengers in turn and then at Tod as though they had all conspired against him.

"Well, what happened?" he demanded foolishly. "You folks got held up, huh? What about it, Tod? You were driving, responsible for your passengers. What the hell happened?"

"Don't blame Tod, Sheriff," Miss Jo Ann said spiritedly. "It wasn't his fault that we were held up."

Peters, the stage line superintendent came in just then, and gave Tod a bad moment by staring at him with hard, questioning eyes. He was a gruff oldster, this Peters, due to retire, and Tod had known for some time that he had a good chance of taking over Peters' job. Now, however, he wasn't at all sure where he stood. For Peters was proud of his record of never having had a passenger hurt on his routes, and here he had a dead man on his hands. He could not openly blame Tod for this, but he could certainly raise a rumpus at the Santa Fe office, and Tod knew it.

He knew that Peters was on the warpath when he said, "I want the whole story from beginning to end. The rest of you keep quiet until Dunn has had his say."

That "Dunn" business just about proved that Peters was after his scalp, Tod thought. He told what had happened, and after he had finished, the others agreed to his every word. Even the drummer, who'd calmed down some, had to admit that the tall bandit had fired deliberately into Mellert's back.

Peters, nevertheless, had plenty to say "From the way you told it, they were a trigger-happy pair, so you should have known better than to jump that man."

Tod reddened. "He slapped Miss Jo Ann."

"You should have ignored it," Peters answered testily. "If you'd done so, Mellert would still be alive."

"But Mr. Mellert didn't move a muscle," Miss Jo Ann objected. "That outlaw had no reason to kill him."

"Don't question me, miss," Peters told her gruffly. "That fellow was rattled to begin with. You're lucky he didn't shoot you."

"Mellert you say?" the sheriff bellowed. "Was that his name? Andrew Mellert?"

Tod nodded. "I carried him three or four times before this. He and a partner own a mine in the hills near Rincon Creek. If I remember right, his partner's name is Brozen, or something like that."

The sheriff scratched his temple. "I know that outfit. It's up in Rincon Canyon. They got a half a dozen men working up there."

Peters demanded abruptly, "How do

you happen to know about them, Dunn?"

Tod hesitated. "The last time I carried Mellert—a month or so ago—he rode on the box with me and did a good job of airing his griefs." Tod hesitated again. "It seems he and Brozen didn't get along—"

"What's that got to do with the holdup?" Peters asked.

Tod shrugged. "I don't know as it has anything to do with the holdup. And yet. . . . Well, it's a feeling I got about those outlaws. They weren't professionals to begin with. And they didn't seem at all interested in robbing us. They overlooked—"

"So they weren't professionals!" Sheriff Lane interrupted. "They just saw their chance to make some easy money, but they were so danged scared that they didn't take their time."

"So scared," Peters put in, "that when you jumped the little one the other started shooting."

Tod's jaws firmed. "That's what we all thought at first, but it's not true. I'll bet that tall fellow had his gun no more than six inches from Mellert's back when he fired. And he pulled trigger after I'd been knocked down."

Miss Jo Ann gave Tod a breathless look. "I know what you're trying to say, and now that I think of it I believe you're right." She turned to the sheriff. "It was as though that outlaw took that moment of confusion to deliberately kill Mr. Mellert."

"Hogwash," Peters snorted.

TOD STARED at the floor, unable to rid himself of the feeling that there had been something phoney about the holdup. He couldn't help but consider that the whole business had been staged to cover a murder.

One thing was fairly certain; the outlaws had been strangers to Mellert, else he would have recognized them despite the fact that they'd been masked.

Then there was the fact that Mellert and Brozen hadn't gotten along. That had been the situation a month ago, anyway. It might have amounted to nothing worse than a petty quarrel, and yet wasn't it possible that their misunderstanding had been such that Brozen had hired the outlaws to kill his partner? Tod knew it wasn't the first time someone had paid to have a man killed.

But to think so in this case was one thing; to say so openly would be worse than foolish. Tod knew that once he voiced this possibility, Peters would fire him on the spot, and he'd be right in doing so. You couldn't go around accusing a complete stranger of staging a murder when you had no real proof. For all Tod knew, Brozen was a good fellow who'd never given a thought to having his partner killed.

And yet the possibility was certainly there.

One of the deputies made a list of what had been stolen from the passengers. It didn't amount to much, but Miss Jo Ann was upset because she had lost her watch, and she described it in minute detail.

"It was my mother's and my grandmother's before her," she said. "Good heavens, it was priceless to me."

"It's a mess all around," Peters said, glaring at Tod. He turned to the sheriff. "Are you riding up to that mine tomorrow?"

"I reckon I'll have to."

"Then I'll ride with you. I want to find out what I can about Mellert's family." Peters gave Tod another hard look and went out.

The sheriff spoke to his deputies then, and told them to go right out to where the holdup had occured and follow the outlaws' tracks as far as they could before dark. "Then camp right there and follow 'em first thing in the morning. The rest of you—" he said, turning to the others—"can leave." He scratched his temple. "I reckon that about takes care of it."

"You ought to ride up to that mine tonight, Lane," said Tod.

The sheriff scowled. "Why? Be dark by the time I get there, and I got no hankering to travel those hills at night."

"Well, I was just thinking—"

"You're likely thinking that those outlaws are headed that way, but I can't agree with you. Why, they'd have had to either circle this town or ride straight through to reach the hills, and they wouldn't be that foolish." He squinted at Tod. "Ain't that about right?"

"I reckon," Tod said, knowing there was no point in arguing with the sheriff. No point at all unless he voiced his suspicions. And to do so would mean accusing Brozen of a crime he might not even be aware of.

Tod glanced briefly at Miss Jo Ann and followed the others outside. The lieutenant turned to her as though he meant to see her home, but she fell into step with Tod and said, "I hope this doesn't mean your job. That would be unfair."

Tod sighed. "I guess there are other jobs."

She said softly, "You were very brave to jump that outlaw when he slapped me. He might have killed you."

Tod's heart thumped. "Oh, I don't guess so," he said, and knew he'd remember her wistful smile as long as he lived.

They turned the corner toward her boarding house, and when they stopped at the gate she said anxiously, "You think something's wrong, don't you?"

"I could be the one that's wrong," Tod said.

"You could be right, too," Miss Jo Ann told him.

Tod made a face. "I suppose so. But supposing is about all it amounts to. Like supposing that tall fellow shot Mellert deliberately. He fired twice when once would have been enough, as though he wanted to make sure of his man. And like supposing that someone hired them to kill Mellert—" Tod shrugged.

"It could have happened that way," Miss Jo Ann said.

"Let's suppose so, anyway," Tod said, thinking this was the very first time he'd ever really talked with Miss Jo Ann. "It's doubtful, though, that they were paid to do the job in advance. That's why I thought they might've headed for the mine, to collect for what they did." He paused briefly. "I aim to find out, too. If I make a fast ride up there I got a chance of running into them."

Miss Jo Anne's eyes widened.

"Don't be foolish, Tod. Tell the sheriff what you think and let him attend to it. You stick to driving the stage."

"Lane wouldn't listen to me," Tod said. "And if Peters ever learns what I think, I'll really be out of a job."

"That doesn't matter—"

"I guess not, except that I was in line for his job, and now that I got nothing to lose I might as well follow up my suspicions."

"Oh, Tod," Miss Jo Ann moaned. "You didn't tell me that you had a chance of being promoted. Maybe if I talk to Mr. Peters—"

Tod swallowed. "It's awful nice of you to say that, Miss Jo Ann. But I don't think you'd better do that. What I'm gonna do is ride up to that mine and learn what I can." He backed away from her as she made another protest, shaking his head. "It's got to be tonight or never, because those fellows are bound to be out of the county by morning. And with any luck at all I'll get your watch back, Miss Jo Ann!" He turned and ran headlong toward his room behind the depot.

ONLY a faint ruddy light touched the higher hills as Tod galloped along the road toward Rincon Canyon. He had looked for sign all the way and had seen no fresh tracks. But this didn't surprise him. If the outlaws had headed for the mine they wouldn't have been apt to chance being spotted on a public road.

It was dusk by the time Tod entered the broad canyon. He tied his horse in the brush and, rifle in hand, slipped forward until he came in sight of the mine holdings.

There was the bunkhouse, a small cabin and a cook shed. Four ore wagons were parked near a corral where a dozen mules browsed. Beyond, were mounds of tailings, but the mine itself was not in sight. Four men smoked and talked outside the bunkhouse, and a fat man in an apron was cleaning up in the cook shed. A sixth man was washing a garment at the creek.

It was a peaceful twilight scene. These men had finished their day's work, had had their supper and would soon turn to their bunks. It wasn't likely that the two outlaws were hiding out here.

Of course not, Tod thought suddenly. For if it was true that Brozen had planned his partner's death, it stood to reason that he wouldn't want the miners to see the outlaws. Not with the sheriff due, and Brozen would be smart enough to know that Lane would come here and likely question the men.

A lamp burned in the bunkhouse but there was no light in the cabin, Tod noted. If the cabin was where Brozen bunked, it could mean he was gone. Had he gone to meet the outlaws? To pay them off?

The man at the stream straightened and wrung out the garment he had washed and spread it across a bush to dry. Then he joined the others.

Tod was getting set to slip back to his horse and make his presence known, when he heard the muffled thump of hoofs from up the canyon. A thick-bodied rider trotted into view on a black horse. He stopped at the bunkhouse and spoke to the men; he took a watch from his vest and looked at it and put it back. Then he stabled his horse and strode over to the cabin and went inside.

Tod took a deep breath. He had nothing to go on except his suspicions. Brozen—if it was Brozen who had just returned—might have only been out for a ride. There would be nothing else, then, that he could do.

He went after his horse and rode forward into the clearing. The men outside the bunkhouse watched him expectantly. Tod drew up and said, "Brozen around?"

"He's in the cabin," one of the men said.

Just then Brozen stepped out on his porch and crossed the yard slowly. He had a heavy face and a thick black mustache. "You looking for me?" he asked.

"That's right," Tod said, and introduced himself. "I was driving the stage this afternoon when we were held up on the Boulder Grade. I hate to be the one to tell you this, Mr. Brozen, but your partner, Andrew Mellert, was killed by one of the bandits."

Brozen appeared shocked. "Good Lord," he said, and looked at his men who had come to their feet and were crowding closer. "Andy is dead!" He stared at Tod. "How did you happen to come here?"

"I'm with Sheriff Lane's posse," Tod lied. "They're scouting the country south of here, working this way. Somebody spotted the two bandits in the hills a while back, so since I was right close I thought I'd tell you what happened and ask if you saw any sign of them."

"I've been up the canyon for the last hour but I didn't see anyone," Brozen said slowly, and turned to the men. "Any riders stop by here?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"Well, I'm damned," Brozen said, staring at the ground. "They killed Andy." He looked at Tod. "You say Lane and his men are heading this way?"

Tod nodded. "We figure to camp in the hills tonight, get an early start in the morning."

"By God, I'll join you boys in the morning," Brozen said vigorously. "And if they're in these hills we'll get 'em."

"I sure hope so," Tod said, and neck-reined his horse. "Well, I'd better go back and find the posse. Not much more we can do this evening, I reckon, but we'll be hunting again at the crack of dawn."

HE LIFTED a hand and rode away. The moment he was out of the canyon, he turned up the north slope and galloped forward. Finally he stopped and slid down and moved to the rim. From there he looked at the mine holdings, and though by this time it was fairly dark, there was still light enough to see men grouped at the corral, where Brozen was saddling his horse.

Tod, who had been hoping for this, still had no idea that it meant anything. He watched Brozen ride out of the yard and turn up the canyon, and then he went back to his own horse.

The canyon ran its winding course for

a mile or so before it opened onto a narrow valley. Here, Tod waited behind a cluster of giant boulders. Finally he heard the sound of Brozen's horse and then saw him trotting through the deepening dusk.

For the first time, Tod guessed with an upsurge of grim joy that his suspicions had not been groundless. Brozen had ridden out the moment he heard that his partner had been killed, likely saying to his men that he would take a look around just in case. Maybe that was all he was really doing, but there was a good chance that he was riding to warn the outlaws that the sheriff was already on their trail, and that they'd better ride all night if necessary to get out of the country.

After Brozen had passed, Tod swung up the nearest slope. He followed his man as closely as possible and, after a half an hour later, when they had nearly crossed the valley, a tiny light showed through the aspens that surrounded a little hollow. Tod tensed, knowing it was a small campfire. He was within a hundred yards of it when he dismounted, and still there was no sign that Brozen had reached the camp.

Gun in hand, Tod walked ahead. As he came through the trees, the sound of an angry voice reached him, saying, "I took a chance that you were still here! What the hell's the matter with you two? You should've been miles from here by this time. Now there's a good chance that the posse will spot you."

"We've had one hell of a long day, and we're tired," one of the outlaws answered gruffly. "But I reckon we'd best move out."

Tod saw them then, the two outlaws hunkered beside the fire, Brozen standing to one side holding a rifle.

"If it ain't too late," he said.

The tall outlaw rose. "What do you mean, too late?"

"I'm thinking that there's a good chance you two'll get caught. And once that happens, you'll talk." Brozen shifted his rifle.

Tod came forward softly, and for the first time he got a good look at the faces of the two outlaws. Both faces held startled expressions, as though their owners had just then realized what it was that Brozen had said.

"What the hell—" the tall one exploded finally, and just then Brozen moved his rifle to fire.

"Hold it!" Tod said. "Drop the artillery pronto."

Brozen half jerked around and fired as he did so. Tod squeezed the trigger of his gun and Brozen dropped the rifle and clutched a shattered shoulder.

Both bandits had gone for their guns, and Tod shot at the tall one and saw him slump down. The small bandit took one look at his fallen companion and jerked his arms skyward, saying in a shaky voice, "Don't shoot, mister. Don't shoot!"

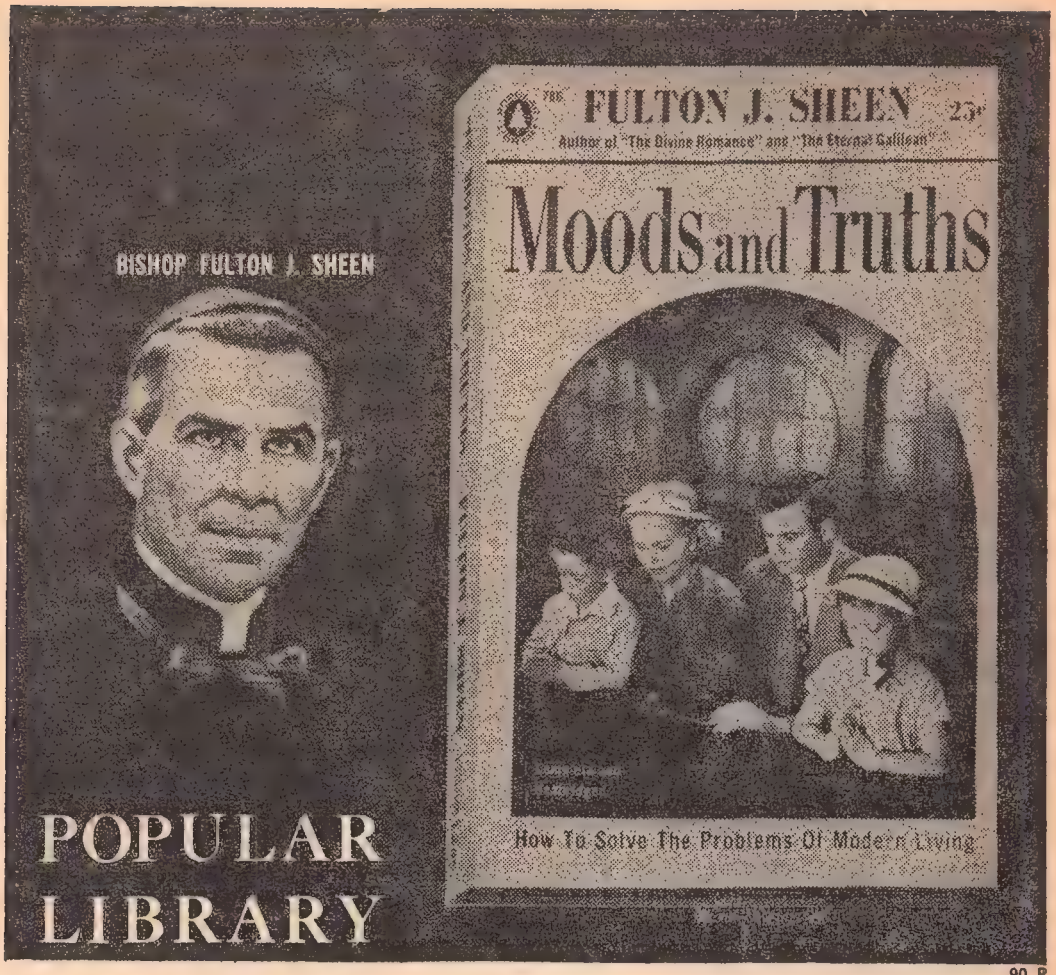
"Not as long as I need your help," Tod said, and stepped into the light. He collected their guns, noting that the tall bandit was dead, while Brozen had passed out from pain and shock. "That makes it just fine," Tod said. "Let's round up the horses. And remember to move carefully unless you want to join your buddy in the hot place. Because that's exactly where you'll be going."

IT WAS nearly midnight before everything was straightened out. Tod had borrowed a wagon at the mine to take the dead man and his prisoners to town. Brent, one of the miners, had accompanied him. On reaching town, Brent admitted to the sheriff that Brozen and Andrew Mellert hadn't been getting along for some months. Mellert had threatened to pull out of the partnership, leaving Brozen financially unable to carry on, and he had Mellert killed.

Corey, the small bandit, confessed that Brozen had hired them to kill his partner, and that it had been Brozen's idea to fake a holdup of the stage.

Peters came down to the sheriff's office in time to hear this, and became quite flustered in his praise of Tod. "This is a feather in our cap, son," he said. "When I send word of what happened to the Santa Fe office, I'll send along a recommendation that you take over my job."

(Continued on page 105)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OUTLAW'S DECISION

By

LEW THOMPSON

THE boy, cotton headed and sprinkled with freckles, sat motionless in the open church belfry. He was fifty feet above Main street and half a block away from the Marshal's office. From that distance Marshal Mike Garrity could see the boy's faded shirt, stirred by a hot summer wind that entered Bootjack from the south. He could see large blue knee patches on the boy's worn overalls.

And from where he sat he could see clearly that it was Chip McCrary up there, the town kid who carried a Pacemaker Colt, whittled from cotton wood and painted with stove black. Chip was Ellen McCrary's brother, and for two reasons, he idolized the town marshal.

The reasons were because he had no father of his own to look up to, and because the Marshal had been kind enough to fashion that play gun after his own real one.

Inside the tower, where you couldn't see, The Bitter Root Kid crouched hiding. He trained his outlaw gun on Chip, who was huddled precariously on the open cupola. Bitter Root uttered vicious threats that carried down Main street, apalling the assembled town folk and cast-

Marshal Mike Garrity had no heart, they thought, but he had one big enough to get him shot

ing a black cloak of fear over the entire community.

In his swivel chair by the window, Marshal Mike Garrity glanced out at the late sun. Still an hour, he judged, before Bitter Root would begin to seriously consider harming the boy. And when it comes, Mike resolved, it will be Ellen McCrary's decision, not mine. As Chip's guardian she would decide whether or not to give in to the Outlaw's unreasonable demands.

In the chair next to him, Mike's deputy, Rules Benton, said, "This is sure dandy. Bitter Root's held out since noon, and we've done nothing but sit." He took his feet off the desk and sat forward, a stalwart young man with jet black hair.

Mike folded large hands over the two-inch cigar butt he was smoking and squinted against the blue smoke that rose past his sun-leathered face. "Time'll come to act," he told the anxious deputy. "Chip's still alive. That's what matters."

Not old, but filled with unresting age put there by the war, Mike deliberated long over decisions now. And he had not fooled himself about this one. When the time came it would *not* be Ellen's or this deputy's or even this town's decision. It would be his.

It had always been that way, because he was different.

He raked off the Stetson and fanned himself, revealing the long ugly scar behind his ear. No one saw that scar except his deputy. Mike wore his hair long beneath the tight-drawn hat to hide it. It had been so long ago that even Mike sometimes forgot it was there, except in the mornings when he accidentally raked it with the sharp tines of his comb.

"We're not getting anywhere, sitting here," Rules Benton said.

Mike straightened suddenly and turned his gaze on the crowd in the street. "All right, Benton, suppose you do something! Find out what's happened to the troops from Fort Steele."

"Nothing's happened and nothing's going to happen. Fort Steele thinks you're loco."

"Find out, damn it!" Mike yelled. "Jingle your spurs."

"Yes, Sir!" Benton said. He stepped out to the street and after a moment Mike heard him talking to the telegrapher.

"They don't approve of Marshal Garrity's plan," the key-puncher said. "Colonel Johnson want's to know why Garrity don't give Bitter Root a horse and save all this. Maybe save the boy, too."

An ascenting mumble sounded from the crowd outside Mike's window. Mike put the cigar between his lips and moved it stubbornly to the corner of his mouth. Of the dozens gathered out there only five or so mattered. Ellen McCrary, because she was Chip's sister. Doc Sheridan, an ex-confederate soldier and a good medic. Mayor Willoby and the Reverend Downs; the former because of his official capacity. The latter because of what could happen in the next hour, involving his devine ordinance over a man's soul.

"We don't have time to explain," Mike yelled out the window. "Tell Johnson it's urgent. Tell him I'll explain later."

Mike heard his instructions being repeated by the telegrapher and later he saw the man hurrying to his station at the express office. Mike dropped his cigar into a sand bucket at his feet and squinted up again at the boy.

His jaw grew hard, like the base of a setting maul, and he thought of the dark-faced outlaw in the church tower.

BITTER ROOT was a notorious killer, as everyone knew. He had ridden into town about noon, held up the bank and had been slapping leather out of town when Garrity and Benton had run into the street to stop him.

Wanting to help, young Chip McCrary had come out of Tom Coffey's drug store, carrying his toy gun. Trapped and desperate, Bitter Root had collared the boy and using him as a shield he had ducked into the church. His gang had ridden off, and now Bitter Root was anxious to join them.

He was demanding a horse and a free ride out of town, taking Chip as a precaution. So far Mike had stalled, refusing to

give in, fearing they'd never see Chip alive again if Bitter Root once rode off with him. And now Bitter Root had set six o'clock as the deadline and time was fast running out.

Rules Benton came back in off the street. "What can we do with Pony soldiers?"

"I'm not sure," Mike said. "But I like working with soldiers."

Mike had a plan. A troop of crack riflemen could blast Bitter Root to kingdom-come through the thin church siding. But Chip could get hurt, too. It was not a good plan, but it helped to relieve the silent pressure of Bootjack's citizenry while Mike thought of something better.

But the town did not matter, Mike told himself. Only Ellen McCrary mattered and she had remained silent through all of it. She had not wept, nor spoken a word. But soon she would have to come to him, and when she did he could not disappoint her.

This is like keeping a roaring fire in a barnful of hay without burning down the building, Mike thought. He looked at Benton. "Johnson'll send troops. He's got to."

"I doubt it," Benton said. "He knows you Mike—Mad Mike."

Mike knew what Benton meant and his hand automatically fingered the ugly scar and he squeezed the hat back on his head without saying anything.

Benton looked at his big turnip watch. "If they started right now, they'd be slicing it thin to get here by six."

"Poor Chip, like a scared rabbit with a muzzle at his head," Mike said. "If Bitter Root would only take the money we offered."

"He don't trust you, Mike."

"I'd probably kill him at that," Garrity said. He rose abruptly from his chair. "Come on, let's go have another talk with him."

"Won't do any good," Benton replied.

"And it can't do any harm," Mike said irritably.

When Mike went out the door, the town folk stared hard at him. Mike felt like telling them to go on home, that they were just making matters worse. But he said nothing. They had a right to be here. He moved past their fear-ridden faces and on down toward the white church.

Walking along he thought of the one person back there who really mattered—Ellen McCrary. He remembered the one time he had called on her, right after he'd come home from the war. They'd gone to a homecoming dance at Coyle's barn. He had gotten drunk and afterwards, going home, he had kissed her, a little ardently because he had been away so long.

"You're drunk," Ellen had said. "Please, Mike, don't!"

Mike had ignored her and had kissed her again.

Ellen had cried then and pulling away she had scrubbed her mouth with a handkerchief. Maybe it had been an impulsive act, or perhaps she'd really meant it. In either event Mike had never called on Ellen McCrary again.

"I'm going into the tower," Mike told Benton when they had reached the church. "Maybe I can find out something."

"You can get shot," Benton said.

Mike only looked at Benton with cold gray eyes that gave no argument either way.

In the quiet sanctuary he unstrapped his gunbelt and handed it to Benton. He set the flat-wrunged ladder up beneath the trap door and started up. Lifting the lid an inch he said. "I don't have a gun, Kid. I just want to talk."

Mike heard nothing, and tossing the lid back he peered through. Higher up he could see Chip. "Take it easy, son," Mike said. "We're going to get you out."

The boy grinned, showing a kind of courage and he showed Mike the toy gun. "I'm not worried, marshal."

MIKE squeezed his shoulders through the opening and while his eyes adjusted to the rough-studding and cross beams, he felt the sudden hard pressure of Bitter Root's gun pushing down against the crown of his Stetson.

"Get back," Bitter Root said.

Mike eased back a little. "Can't we talk?"

"I want a fresh horse, marshal—a good fast one."

"We're going to let you have that horse," Mike said. "But first we got to be sure about the boy."

"You've got my word," Bitter Root said.

"I like to see a man when he gives me his word," Mike said. "So I know he means it."

Bitter Root increased the pressure on Mike's head. "You got no choice. Just fetch the horse."

"Well," Benton said, when Mike had backed down. "That's that."

"Yeah," Garrity said. "That's that."

"I guess it's pretty rough on Chip."

"Pretty rough," Garrity said. He stared back at the darkness. "Bitter Root's nerves are wearing thin. He'll turn crazy if we don't do something soon."

"What'll we do?" Benton asked.

"Nothing we can do, but wait," Mike said.

"Maybe we could blast him out?" Benton said. "Abercromby'd have dynamite."

"That's too risky. We're wasting time thinking up stunts."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Mike left the church and turned a worried glance toward his longer shadow in the street. Then drawing up and waiting for Benton, he said, "I honestly don't know. What would you do?"

The deputy didn't have to think. "I'd give him the horse," Benton said. "Right now."

"No matter what might happen to Chip?"

"What happens if you don't?" Benton argued. "Either way it's a gamble, but one way you're protected."

Mike said nothing. He knew that Benton meant to be practical, and you couldn't argue against it. You could know deep down that in one case out of a hundred it was wrong to be practical. You could hope that you were right in thinking that this was one of the times and you could hold out as long as possible. Mike thought then that Benton was lucky, thinking that way. He didn't have to weigh a decision on its merit, he had only to take the easy way.

Mike could do it that way now, but he'd be going against something that was stronger than reason. Something he knew and felt against something he was able to reason out.

He drew up in the street and glanced back at the tower. "Bitter Root's scared right now," he said. "Maybe you'd better bring a horse up from Coyle's barn. Make sure he sees it."

"That's showing some smart," Benton said.

"Just caution," Mike said correcting the statement. He put on his gunbelt and moved through the crowd to his office. Then turning back he saw Benton duck into Coyle's livery. Benton had been Mike's deputy for a year now and nothing like this had come up before. In a way Benton regretted being in on it, Mike could tell. But in another way Mike sensed that Benton wanted to help.

Benton could have ridden the ranch circuit that morning with the brand inspector, but instead he had loafed around the office with Mike. They had been playing dominoes when they'd heard the shooting down at the bank. Mike had come out of his chair fast. He'd gone into the street with his gun drawn.

"You sure run to meet trouble," Benton had said later. "Is that why in the Army they called you 'Mad Mike?' "

Folks figured Mike had earned that long, ugly scar, taking on something a little too big for one man to handle. But no one knew for sure. Mike had never mentioned it.

'Mad Mike,' Garrity thought about it now. Several times he had come close to talking about it, of just sitting down and getting it all straightened out for this town. Mike was different, that was it, and the whole town might as well know it.

He saw Benton then, coming out of Coyle's, leading a long-legged gelding and he went on into his office and sat down to wait.

At ten minutes to six he'd had no word from Fort Steele so he called Ellen and the others into his office. He gave Ellen his chair by the window and dragged an old horse hair sofa over for the others. Then he stood for a moment surveying them coolly.

The gray-haired Doc Sheridan was the first to speak. "Well, Mike, how are we making out?"

Mike thought a moment before answering. "We aren't doing any good," he said.

"Do you aim to give him the horse then."

"We can," Mike said and he explained about the Bitter Root Kid. How after one of these sorties he always disappeared to a hide-out, known only to himself and his gang. It was his ability to keep this place secret that assured his future success. "What would happen," Mike said, "if Chip learned the whereabouts of that hideout? Up there, Chip's safe. Bitter Root can bargain, long as Chip's alive. Bitter Root knows that and he won't harm the boy."

"Unless we push too far," Doc said.

"Unless we push too far," Mike agreed.

"And who's qualified to say when we've pushed too far?" Ellen McCrary asked. She spoke matter-of-factly, without bitterness. "You, Mr. Garrity? You have a reputation for pushing beyond the limit in about everything you undertake."

THERE was a minute of uncomfortable silence and then Mayor Willoby spoke. "What makes you think, Garrity, that Bitter Root won't keep his word?"

"I don't know what makes me think that," Garrity said. "I honestly don't." He glanced at the mayor and then he looked directly at Ellen. At the way the high-collared shirt front accentuated her slender neck. At the way her black skirt fell in long graceful folds from a waist he could span with both hands.

And for that instant he wished he was not Mike Garrity, the man who was different. He wanted to be like Benton or the gangling chemist who worked at Tom Coffey's drug store. Anyone but the man who would make this decision.

"Maybe you know what to do, Ellen," Mike said. "If you do, I'd be glad to listen."

She looked at him for just a moment, like a shy mountain doe, the way she had looked that night before he had started getting drunk. Then her eyes clouded and without comment she turned to gaze out the window.

Mike quickly faced the others. "Well, that's our problem, gentlemen. That's why I called you together. We've got ten minutes to decide whether we call Bitter Root's bluff or turn him loose. It's strictly up to you."

"Why ten minutes?" Doc Sheridan asked. "Why not longer if we need it?"

"Bitter Root figures on reaching his gang before dark. If he gets a fast horse by six he can just make it. If not he'll have to go on foot after dark. He wouldn't like that."

"Will he really take Chip with him?" Reverend Downs asked.

"That's what we'd be gambling on," Mike said. "Without a horse and after dark, he might leave Chip behind."

"Yes, and he might shoot the boy, just out of spite," Mayor Willoby said.

"That's possible," Mike said, agreeing.

"Why wouldn't he just hole-up indefinitely," Doc asked, "and bank on your giving in first?"

"That'd give us time to send a rider to Fort Steele and explain the circumstances. He knows that a company of troopers could blast him out of there."

"Then as I see it we have no choice but to call his bluff," Doc said.

Mike glanced around. "Is that the way you all see it?"

"I think it should be up to Ellen," Reverend Downs said. He walked around the sofa and sat down.

Ellen looked quickly at Mike. There was a tight string of feeling reaching out to him now. He could tell. "What do you say, Mike?"

"It doesn't matter what I say. I'm only the marshal."

Doc Sheridan rose from the couch.

"Well, I don't see much choice. After all we know Chip's safe where he is."

"But, Doc," Willoby said. "Perhaps Bitter Root isn't bluffing."

"It's up to Ellen to decide," Reverend Downs insisted.

Rules Benton came in off the street. "Two minutes to six, Mike. Bitter Root swears he means to keep his word. Better let me take him the horse."

Mike shook his head and sucked in a deep breath.

"Mike!" It was Ellen. Mike turned to face her. "What do you say, Mike?" she asked.

Mayor Willoby sighed, a relief sounding sigh, and Doc Sheridan walked to the street window and looked out, his face set in stern straight lines.

The room grew silent then and Mike stood in dead center. He had known it would be this way. When their own inner-searching failed, they would turn to him. Mike felt an aloneness now. And because there had been other situations like this one in his life, he knew that from this point on there would be no help. Benton had said to give Bitter Root the horse, but Benton would not be responsible if that failed. Benton was a practical man, as most men were, and he avoided responsibility. Bitter Root had run over men like Benton, and he would go on running over them, until he was stopped.

Suddenly Mike's hand lifted and his fingers touched the long scar. He stopped thinking then. It was as though a direct line had gone out to the past and he had chopped it off.

He turned to Benton and motioned him roughly into the street. They stood for a moment in front of the big gelding, silent and tense. Now Bitter Root would be watching, Mike knew. He'd be weighing the odds just as Mike was now doing. He'd be trying for the best deal he could get, knowing, as Mike did, that any way he went there was a good chance of running smack into a dead end.

Benton lifted the big turnip watch and showed it to Mike. "Troops won't make it, Mike. They can't."

The sun dropped below the distant ridge, causing a night chill to move swiftly through the street. Mike peered up at the mute boards of the tower, guessing at the mental state of the man inside; frightened, worried, crazy as a caged eagle. A wrong move would set him off. Pushed too far he'd act without discretion. And facing these facts, Mike could not honestly carry his bluff farther.

HE GAVE a little sigh and patted the gelding's neck. "All right, Benton, we'll take him the horse."

They had covered half the distance to the church when a sudden sigh lifted from the tense street crowd behind them. Glancing up, Mike saw that Bitter Root had climbed up now, that he had put one arm around the boy and was dragging him inside, the way a predatory lioness makes off with a life she had stilled.

Something in the outlaw's arrogant grin caused aching doubt to surge through the Marshal. "I've got to have a talk with him, Benton. I've got to see his eyes. That's the least I can do. You stand by with the horse and keep the crowd back. And, Benton," Mike warned, "no heroics. You understand?"

"Sure, Mike!"

Inside the church tower the light was fast fading and Bitter Root was a dull, hard-breathing shape as he lowered himself and Chip to the floor boards. With one hand he held the gun an inch from Chip's head, with the other he clung to him like a bloodsucking leech.

Mike eased into the corner, scarcely breathing. "I'm here to talk terms, Kid." His words were as soft as a kitten's tread.

Bitter Root spun, wild-eyed and sweating.

"You're getting the horse," Mike said hastily. "You're getting a free ride out of town. There's just one thing we got to have understood."

Sweat ran down Bitter Root's dark face. He clutched Chip so close that the boy squirmed to relieve the pressure.

"Do exactly as he says, Chip, and you won't get hurt," Garrity said. "Ain't that

right, Bitter Root?"

Bitter Root's eyes darted like the needles of a compass. "It's got to be right for me, Garrity. No tricks," he said.

It was a slack promise, Mike knew, voiced from a mind that by now was dull-glazed and kill crazy. But it was something.

"We're going to follow you out of town," Mike said. "Me and my deputy. There'll be no posse. When you release Chip, we'll turn back."

"Are you asking or telling?"

"I'm making a deal," Mike said. "I got to make sure it's right, same as you. No tricks."

Cautiously, with both hands, Mike loosed his gun-belt and let it slide off his hip to the floor. "See, Kid! No tricks."

Outside there was a slight commotion. The crowd must be getting anxious.

"It better work just that way," Bitter Root warned. He jammed the gun hard against Chip's temple, tearing flesh, and a trickle of blood ran down the boy's flush cheek.

"I understand," Mike said.

Bitter Root relaxed his grip then and nudged Chip forward to the loft opening. "You open it, Marshal. Then move back to the corner."

Mike eased forward and lifted the lid. Then staring down he was filled with sudden horror. The flat wrunged ladder was gone, and Benton was nowhere in sight. His legs, straddling the door, trembled. He fought to hold back the swirl-crazy pattern that flooded his mind.

Somehow Benton had misunderstood. He had taken the ladder away and Bitter Root, thinking it a trick, would be at once furious.

There'd be no time to explain. Feeling sweat pile up in the palms of his hands, Mike stepped back. Bitter Root pushed cautiously forward and in that instant, before Bitter Root looked down, Mike thrust between him and the boy. He lifted Bitter Root's gun with one hand and shoved Chip into the opening with the other. "Jump, Chip!" he yelled.

The sudden blast of Bitter Root's gun echoed in the small chamber, and at once blinded, Mike staggered back. He felt burning heat against his chest and stabbing pain in his shoulder. For what seemed a long time Mike fought to gain possession of the gun. Quick clotting blood warmed his shoulder and then his grasp on Bitter Root's sweating wrist was broken and he was hurled roughly back. Dizziness swept him and he felt the trickle of warm blood down his arm, and the cooling patch as it blotted at his elbow.

HE SAW Bitter Root dimly then, standing over him. Below Mike thought he heard Benton, but there was confusion in his mind. He could be sure of but one thing, Chip was safe. He could hear the rising cheer from the crowd in the street.

And then the loud metallic click of Bitter Root's Colt sounded in the tower, and Bitter Root was swearing at him.

"Get up," Bitter Root demanded.

Mike was all alone now, as he had known he would be.

"Stand up," Bitter Root insisted and Mike, lifting his right arm to the studding, pulled slowly to his feet. Bitter Root grinned and with the gun muzzle jammed against Mike's belly his sweating hand closed on the trigger.

Mike's eyes closed and his muscles tensed against the boards. Then the gun blast sounded, but it sounded from a distance, and Mike felt no jarring pain. He opened his eyes and saw Bitter Root caving in, as though his spine had been yanked away from behind. Bitter Root gazed at Mike in dumb surprise, then pitched forward on his face.

Smoke drifted into the tower from overhead and glancing up, Mike saw Benton standing on the roof, a smoking gun in his hand. "Garrity's been hurt," Benton yelled. "Get Doc Sheridan up here right away."

Then he put a stockinged foot through the tower window and clamored down. "I had to do something, Mike. Something quick. Ol' Johnson showed up with his pony soldiers. Had every last one of Bitter

Root's boys sacked to their horses, dead as door nails. Ran onto them on his way over here. I figured when Bitter Root saw that, poor Chip's life wouldn't be worth the paper in a confederate note. I borrowed the ladder, took off my boots and shinnied up the roof."

Mike felt dullness coming to him again and he slumped to the floor. Benton knelt and put his arm under Mike's head. "Mad Mike," he said almost fondly. "If it wasn't for you, I'd never found the guts to do a thing like that."

Mike felt the stabbing pain in his right shoulder but his mind worked on something else. A thing, that despite the pain, had suddenly come clear in his mind. He had thought all along that he was different, he realized that it was not so.

He thought of the ugly head-scar and he understood that even then he had not been alone. There had been others, more practical than himself perhaps, but he had not been alone. Any man would take the long chance, as Benton had done, when it was right to do so.

A man stood alone, only when he chose to think that way. It was a bitter thing to admit when he thought of Ellen and this town and the time he had wasted.

And then they were putting the ladder up and Doc Sheridan was coming through, carrying a lantern.

"Get some men," he told Benton. "Take him to Ellen McCrary's where I can clean him up and put him to bed."

Doc leaned forward then, examining the wound. "When word passed that you'd been hit, Ellen insisted we put you up at her place for a few days. Said she wanted to be the one to look after you."

The sharp pain in Mike's shoulder eased to dullness and Mike knew before Doc said it that he was going to be fine.

WOMAN-SHY

(Concluded from page 96)

"Thanks, Mr. Peters," said Tod, feeling like a new man. "I think I can handle it just fine."

"Well, I reckon that just about settles everything for now," Sheriff Lane said expansively. "We can straighten out the rest of it tomorrow." He looked at the loot on his desk that they had found on the small bandit. "You might as well take what they stole off you, Tod."

Tod did. He also palmed Miss Jo Ann's gold watch. It was kind of late to be calling on a girl, but for once Tod didn't feel shy about it. Mrs. Baker, who ran the boarding house, was still up and regarded him with suspicion until he explained himself. She had him wait in the parlor and finally Miss Jo Anne came in wearing a crimson robe, her face flushed with sleep. She brightened when she saw Tod.

He told her what had happened, and tears showed in her eyes when he handed her the watch. She took a shaky breath and kissed him on the cheek, and said in a choked-up voice, "This is the nicest thing that ever happened to me."

Tod cleared his throat. "Miss Jo Ann," he said in a firm voice, "will you honor me with your company at the church dance Saturday night?"

"Tod, I'd love to go," Miss Jo Ann said.

Tod's heart beat crazily, for the way she said it made him realize that more than just a dance was ahead of them. A lot more. Enough to fill both their lives for as long as they lived.

The man with the rifle said, "Don't move, mister."

GRUBLINE RIDER

By W. J. REYNOLDS

IT WAS one of those tight times when a job was something dreams are made of. No one needed a hand, or couldn't afford one, and a grubline rider was regarded with bare courtesy, or with open hostility. It seemed to Bill Whitehall that he had crossed the path of the latter more than a hungry man should. But the last three places he'd stopped could have been worse.

The last hundred miles of New Mexico Territory, he had covered with three meals. A homesteader, a one-horse rancher and a cowcamp. The homesteader had fed him with little courtesy, the one-horse rancher had appeared glad to have someone to talk to, for his wife had been gone two weeks nursing a sick sister in Las Cruces. The cowcamp had fed him to the ears, and the foreman had even offered to let him trail along, since they were heading south also.

Bill Whitehall never saw the horses they were going to string him up for stealing, but that didn't make the noose fit any less snug

But the foreman had plenty of men and it would have been nothing short of charity. Bill Whitehall wasn't used to that and he had refused with thanks. He had ridden on with a warm feeling for that foreman.

That was the last meal Bill had eaten and it was now noon of the next day and thirty miles south of the camp. Bill Whitehall was hungry, and there were no prospects in this little place called Suntown. He had met with blunt orders to shove off when he'd asked for a chance to work for a meal.

It wasn't much of a place and all possibilities were soon exhausted. The stage station, a blacksmith shop and corral. A well-stocked store. The blacksmith had shoed Bill's horse with sour looks. Bill thought for a minute there that the smith was going to refuse because Bill had sixty cents and the shoeing price was sixty-five.

And that doublejointed turkeyneck in the store had insultingly told Bill that he didn't want no work-shirking from a saddle bum, and to get going. He had been real nasty about it. He'd come out behind Bill, though, looked at the big bay Bill was riding and had offered twenty-five dollars for him and the saddle—nearly exactly one-fifth of their value. Bill had been blunt then, informing the turkeyneck in some detail just what he could do with that twenty-five bucks.

Bill Whitehall sat now with his back against the smithy and scowled at his run-over boots. Suntown was a hell of a town and its few citizens were hell for citizens. About the only generous thing here was the sun; there was plenty of that.

Bill Whitehall kept glancing at the store. Four times in the last hour he had started to his feet with the intention of sticking his rifle muzzle in turkeyneck's belly and demanding groceries and cash. He didn't have a sixshooter any more, for the sixty cents had been the last of it, and he had only two shells left in the Winchester. It was too rickety with the wired stock and beatup mechanism to get a meal out of. But Bill was used to it and could hit any belligerent Apache, if need be.

He scuffed the sand with his boot heel. The old rifle did misfire quite often, and that turkeyneck wouldn't give up a dime's worth of anything without a fight. Besides, Bill didn't take to the idea much; he didn't take any to the idea of becoming an outlaw for a mess of grub.

But the fifth time he moved Bill got to his feet and was about to step to his horse for the rifle when a rider came around the store and dismounted at the tie rail. Bill hadn't seen him coming, with the store between them.

Bill sat back down feeling weak in the belly and knees. He guessed he just wasn't cut from the outlaw pattern. He suddenly felt like hugging that rider who was going into the store.

That fellow looked seedy and trail-worn, and his horse was a bay and ganted as badly as Bill's own horse. His ragged and threadbare raiment might be brothers to Bill's.

Bill sat looking at the store and in a moment angry voices lifted in there, only to be abruptly lowered again. Another grubliner getting his orders maybe.

The new arrival appeared in the store door suddenly, stood looking in Bill's direction a moment, then disappeared again. Five minutes later he came out, led his horse around to the open end of the smithy and Bill could hear the murmur of his voice.

Then the blacksmith's cranky voice lifted, "To hell with you! I'm going to dinner, then I'm taking a nap, then I got six stage horses to shoe, then I'll get to you and not before!"

"But it'll be near night by then!"

"I don't care if it's tomorrow. And I better not see you fooling around in here either. Beat it! Come back in three-four hours!"

The rider stepped around the corner of the smithy and hunkered down near Bill. "Howdy. Hell of a place!"

"Howdy, and Amen," Bill said.

"You getting a shoe job?"

"Had mine shod," Bill said. "Now I need some grub so it can come today instead of still being yesterday to my belly!"

"Grubline?"

"Yeah. Got a job in Tombstone if I can ever get there." Bill's hand went to his shirt pocket then fell away. "That damned turkeyneck in yonder!"

"I know what you mean. I know that storekeeper. Name's Tosser. He'd skin a dead man for two bits."

They sat in silence, and Bill thought, He smells rank as me. He's been covering lots of ground and sweating while he was at it. Two weeks' beard stubble, squinty blue eyes and his skin blistered and scaling. Not used to being in the sun all the time.

The man he studied pulled out a sack of makings and offered them. They both built up smokes.

"My name's Art Brody," he told Bill. "I got a herd of horses trailing down that line of hills yonder. I could use you for a few days. Got nigh a hundred miles to go yet. South. Be grub and a few dollars in it for you. Interested?"

"Boss!" Bill said. "Bill Whitehall's my handle."

"You can start now then. Go west till you hit the first hills, go on across a flat to a line of bluffs. Water-hole there you can't miss. My gear is there. Wait till I get there, and if the boys get there with the horses, tell them to stay. We'll camp there tonight. All right?"

"All right."

Brody got to his feet. "Come over to the store and get something to eat." Together they walked over to the store and went inside.

Brody said to Tosser's sour stare, "Give this man something to eat. Cheese, sardines, airtights, and makings." Tosser didn't move until Brody slapped a five-dollar gold piece on the counter, then he got the food and gave Brody his change.

Brody said to Bill, "Go on out when you're done eating. I'm going to grab some sleep." He went out.

Bill Whitehall ate with a hungry man's concentration, then afterward built up a smoke and went out. He mounted his horse. Brody was flaked out in the shade of the smithy snoring, and Bill rode out.

He had no trouble finding the camp at the water-hole that was a seep from the base of the cliffs making a half-acre of willow thickets and grass. Brody's gear was a bedroll, badly used, a coffee pot and a sack of jerky.

Bill Whitehall stood looking at the camp, the feeling growing in him that all was not as it should be. Just why would a man with a herd of horses be packing his gear on his riding horse? Bill thumbed his stubbled cheek. It didn't make much sense, but maybe they did things different out here. He was getting groceries and a few dollars so why should he worry about it?

He found out two hours later.

He had taken a nap and was smoking a wake-up cigarette when a man stepped out of the willows with a leveled rifle. He said, "Don't move, mister."

"No, sir!" Bill said.

"Kim, holler in the others."

Bill looked the other way and saw Kim —a slight, wiry man with a two weeks' sorrel stubble and bright blue eyes. His rifle was pointed carelessly in Bill's general direction, but the seeming carelessness didn't detract from the dangerousness of that redhead.

Kim lifted a ringing shout and it was answered quickly. Presently four men rode into camp leading two saddled horses. One said, "You got him, Kim."

They all dismounted and gathered near Bill but not too close, then Kim moved forward and ran a searching hand over Bill. "No gun." They all stood looking at Bill with an occasional glance at the man from the willows.

Bill Whitehall stood quietly and looked and he didn't like what he saw, not from where he stood. These men looked like other tough outfits he'd seen. Quiet, too quiet, and their bloodshot, unwinking eyes in stubbled, dirty faces that were hard as iron. The eyes and the mouths Bill especially didn't like. Grim was the word.

He had put his foot into something with Brody's help, and turkeyneck's, too, probably, and it was about to get him killed.

He knew that look, he'd seen it on men before.

The man who'd stepped out of the willows moved around a little. He was small, almost as slight as the red-headed Kim, but his stubble had white in it, his eyes were gray, like fresh broken steel, his leathery face drawn from tiredness and some tearing emotion.

Kim looked at this man and said, "We going to shoot him, Cabe, or hurt a limb?"

There was a disturbed clutching in Bill's stomach and he couldn't take his gaze from Cabe. Cabe held his Winchester like a pistol, the hammer half-cocked under his thumb. He looked at Bill at long time.

"Anybody," Cabe asked, "got any doubts that this is the man?"

Nobody moved except a short-coupled man with darting brown eyes. He ranged the camp, taking his time, looking at Bill's horse, moving him, looking at the tracks. He looked where Bill had ridden in. He came back, a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

"Well, Shorty?" Cabe said.

Shorty shook his head. "Could be the same horse, Cabe. The shoes could make a little difference. It's hard to put a name to but, damn it, I'd hate to say it was the same horse!" He added hastily at Cabe's black look, "Our horse came into camp, Cabe and went out toward town yonder. But this one that come back shod . . ."

"There's honest doubt then?"

Shorty looked uncomfortable, but this was a grave matter. He looked straight at Cabe. "Yes." After a moment he went on, "The horse we been following is a stayer, as you all know. He's a walker, too, his back feet going forward of his forefeet. This one falls short."

Cabe looked at Bill Whitehall who had known enough of such men to keep his mouth shut until he was asked something. "You got a story, mister?"

Bill said, "I'd like to know what this is about. I just got here. Art Brody hired me in Suntown yonder to help with a horse herd he said he had coming along. The blacksmith wouldn't shoe his horse till he'd shod a bunch of stage horses and took a nap. Brody sent me on to wait for the horses and hold them here. I just got into Suntown this morning from up Kansas way. Name's Bill Whitehall."

"Can you prove this?"

"Well, I should," Bill said. "Brody bought me grub in the store. I'm flat busted, took my last sixty cents to get my horse shod. Wasn't nobody friendly till Brody showed. I sure didn't argue none about a job."

"They always cook up a bunch of stuff to delay," a heavy man said. "Let's put a bullet in him or hang him and light out for home."

"Did you see anybody the last day or two that could swear you were at some place else?"

"Sure," Bill said. "The last place was a cowcamp about thirty miles north. I think the foreman's name was Withers. Before that, and east, a feller name of Nunbarger, and from there a nester. Don't remember his name."

"Cantrell?" Kim asked.

"Yes, that was it," Bill said. "Birch Cantrell!"

Cabe said, "That would be the dust from Withers' herd we saw, Kim. Our man could have eat there and got back to make him an alibi. Kim, you're pretty well acquinted around here. Is that storekeeper reliable?"

"Tosser," Kim said, "would lie to God for a nickel."

Cabe's bloodshot eyes were hard. "That makes it look bad for you, mister, but on Shorty's doubt we'll give you a chance. Let's go to town."

Shorty had moved over and unrolled Brody's bed. "Look," Shorty said, and picked up a hackamore. "That's off one of our horses, Cabe. I made that hackamore my ownself."

"We got the right camp," Cabe said. "We'll get the right man."

They mounted and, with Bill Whitehall beside the red-headed Kim, rode toward Suntown. The sun was an hour over the horizen and the stage was a speck in the distance leaving Suntown, when they dismounted in front of Tosser's store.

Cabe said, "Shorty, you and Les and Nick look around."

The three men moved away and the others went into the store.

Tosser was leaning on the counter, regarding them with his unmoving stare. He said to Kim, "What you doing down here?"

"Hunting a horse thief," Kim said. "You know this man?"

"Seen him. Rode in this morning, got his horse shod, eat and left."

"Which way did he come?"

"Didn't see."

"Paid for his grub?"

"Five dollar gold piece."

"What'd he do with the change?"

"Maybe he eat it. I don't know."

"See another rider, name of Art Brody?"

"Yes. Brody's been doing some work for me. The last two weeks. He got in while ago. In the back room asleep."

"Where was he doing this work?"

"Ft. Sumner."

"Where's his horse?"

"That pinto in the blacksmith's lot."

"You're lying!" Bill Whitehall burst out.

"Tosser's strong point," Kim said drily.

Tosser's blank eyes didn't change but he started lifting a shotgun from under the counter. Cabe's rifle clicked to a cock. "Put it back," Cabe said.

Tosser put the gun back. "Get out," he said. "You can go to hell!"

"We'll stay," Cabe said. "Don't try that again."

Shorty came in with the other two men. Cabe looked at him and Shorty said, "The horse is not here. But it has been. At the blacksmith shop. A fresh shod horse went out behind the stage. The blacksmith says that pinto out there is Brody's horse. He said Brody's in the store."

"The back room," Cabe said. "Get him."

Kim went back into the rear of the store with the man he called Les.

Cabe said to Shorty, "Would it help to go get that horse from the stage?"

"Hooves have been pared and shod," Shorty said. "Couldn't prove much other than it walks the same. Somebody talking would be a lot better."

"Somebody will talk," Cabe said.

Bill Whitehall felt the chill in his back again. He glared at the storekeeper who looked blankly back at him.

Kim and Les came back with Art Brody, blinking sleep from his eyes. "What the hell is this?" Brody demanded.

"Where's your horse and saddle?" Cabe asked.

"That brown and white pinto in the lot," Brody said. "Saddle on the fence."

"Shorty," Cabe said. Shorty went out and was back soon. "Well?"

"Bay hairs on the blanket," Shorty said.

It seemed to Bill Whitehall that Brody's face tightened a little. Cabe stepped up in front of Brody.

Brody said, "That pinto has got a brown back mostly. What the hell is the matter with you people?"

"Whose horse went out behind the stage? A bay, maybe?"

"How would I know?" Brody said. "I was asleep."

"So was everybody," Cabe said. "Nobody seen it." His bloodshot eyes were hard as marbles. "How do you explain no white hairs on your saddle blanket?"

Suddenly, he slapped Brody alongside the head with his rifle barrel. Brody's eyes crossed briefly as he staggered and sat down abruptly. Les hauled him to his feet when he steadied. "Where's your bay horse?"

Brody just looked at him from sullen, furious eyes.

"Let's hang both of them," the heavy Les said. "And go home."

"We got lots of liars around here," Kim said. He looked at Brody. "Feller, you'd better answer some questions if you don't want to hang. How'd you come here? Who seen you?"

Brody glared at him a minute then said sullenly, "Several people. I ate at Cal Withers' cowcamp. Nunbarger's before that, and a nester named Cantrell before that. You ought to know them. Your name is Kim Taylor, ain't it?"

Kim nodded and looked at Cabe. "Ain't that hell now? Take a lot more riding to

see which is lying."

"Hell to breakfast!" Les snarled. "Let's hang both of them!"

Cabe was thoughtful for a minute then said, "Withers ain't far away if he was coming this way. Get him, Shorty."

Shorty left and Tosser said, "You people clear out of here. I'm closing up."

"Get some lamps and light up, Tosser," Cabe said. "We'll stay here."

"The hell you will!"

Cabe walked over to Tosser who backed away from the counter. "You going to keep arguing with me, turkeyneck?"

Tosser kept a sullen silence. Bill Whitehall glared at Tosser. "Tosser, you'd better hope they hang me. I got two shells left in my Winchester and I figure to give you both of them!"

"Nick," Cabe said, "you watch Tosser."

They settled down after eating a brief snack of canned food for which Tosser made obvious record. "Somebody'll pay me," he said. "Or I'll get a warrant."

Cabe just looked at him from his bloodshot eyes. They waited for Shorty to come back with Withers.

It was shortly past midnight when Shorty came in with a tall, walrus-mustached cattleman. "Howdy, Cal," Kim said. Cal Withers shook hands with Kim, then Kim introduced him around.

Cabe said, "Mr. Withers, I've lost thirty head of my blooded horses over the last few years. The same man has been stealing them. We were on his tail this time and he had to leave the five he grabbed. That's about ten thousand dollars in all I've lost. Somebody is going to get shot or hung. Did Shorty tell you the setup?"

Withers nodded. He looked at Bill Whitehall and Brody. "Both these men ate with me, Cabe. About two hours apart."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Les said.

"Guess we'll just hang the whole damned bunch!" Cabe suddenly snarled, then got hold of his anger. "What does this Cantrell feller look like?"

Brody gave him a hard grin. "He's a crane-thin feller with a saddle of sandy-

[Turn page]

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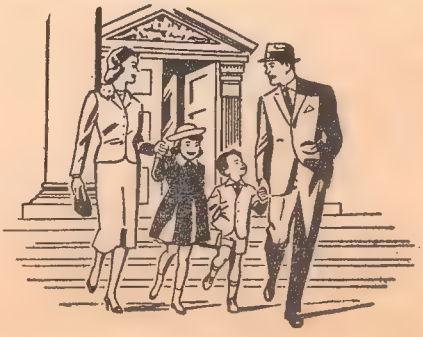

WORSHIP TOGETHER EVERY WEEK!

red hair, a long nose and no teeth. He leans to mush and stew, a bachelor on Piñon Creek."

Cabe threw a cranky look at Kim who nodded. "And Nunbarger?"

"Two-bit farmer-rancher on Coulee Flats. Heavy-set, fiftyish, talks a blue streak. He's got a wife that's thin as he is heavy, and a six-year-old girl looks like her ma. The woman makes real good coffee!"

Both Cal Withers and Kim nodded to Cabe's glance.

Brody threw a hard glance at Bill Whitehall and suddenly beyond Bill's uneasy rage, an idea took hold and held him a minute. He stood up and was instantly the focus of Cabe's rifle.

"Can I ask some questions?" Bill asked. "I think I can clear this up quick. Can I talk to you, Cabe, and to Kim and Withers? Alone?"

After a moment Cabe nodded and the three stepped outside. When they came back, Cabe's eyes were bright and hard. Kim looked almost satisfied. Brody was watching them with a strained attention in which an uneasiness had begun to show around his eyes.

"Your show, Whitehall," Cabe said.

Bill looked at Brody. "You say you eat mush and stew at Cantrell's?"

"Go to hell," Brody said.

Cabe stepped up and Brody backed away. "I ate stew," he said shortly.

"Just answer his questions or I'll beat you to death," Cabe said bluntly. "Your turn will come."

"What's his place look like?" Brody told him. "And Nunbarger's?" Brody described the place. "What does Mrs. Nunbarger look like again?" Brody told him. "And the kid, the girl—did she eat at the table with you?"

Brody was tight and strained. "Yes!"

"She wasn't sick or anything?"

Brody's glance slid around the grim faces. "Well, she wasn't feeling so good."

Bill Whitehall smiled. "And Mrs. Nunbarger, did she make some of this good coffee?"

"'Course she did. She always serves coffee with meals!"

"And Mrs. Nunbarger, did she give you anything when you left?"

Brody was surer now. "Yes. She gave me meat and bread for another snack."

"Are you positive Mrs. Nunbarger did that?"

"Yes, damn it!"

Bill Whitehall looked at Cabe. "Your man, Cabe!"

"Watch that damned turkeyneck!" Cabe said. "He was lying and likely getting his cut!"

"Now wait!" Brody shouted.

"Mister," Cabe said, "you're lying. You're the thief. You could have made Cal's camp and eat and got back on the trail we followed. But you couldn't have got to Nunbarger's forty miles east! You missed a bet there, mister!"

"You're lying!" Brody shouted. "I was there, didn't I tell you?"

Cabe's grin was mirthless. "Yes. But it happens that Mrs. Nunbarger is not home, Brody! She's been in Las Cruces with a sick sister for two weeks. Nunbarger is baching!"

"That's a lie!"

"That's right, Brody," Withers said. "My cook drove her to the stage at Datil! She ain't there and neither were you!"

Brody was a cornered man now and it showed in his eyes, glaring in the lamplight, darting rapidly. Tosser was stiff and for once there was a tightness around his mouth.

Tosser said, "I had to say what I did. Brody said he'd kill me!"

"Where'd he sell my horses?" Cabe said thickly.

"In Mexico," Tosser said.

Brody suddenly lunged for the rear of the store. Cabe's and Kim's rifles slammed together, the reports joining, jumping the lamps. Brody went into a loose heap on the floor.

"Shorty," Cabe said, "get me a burlap sack, a big one."

When Shorty had rustled up a sack from the back of the store, Cabe took it and set about filling it with supplies of food. He also threw in several boxes of shells for a

rifle. "Your rifle is a thirty-thirty?" he asked Bill. Bill nodded. Cabe gave the heavy sack to Shorty. "Fix that behind Bill's saddle."

"Who's going to pay for that?" Tosser asked.

Cabe looked at him a long minute. "Kim, did you hear Tosser say something about a reward for that thief?"

Kim scratched his head. "I think he said a hundred dollars, Cabe."

"Get it," Cabe said to Tosser.

"The hell I will!"

"Tosser," Cabe said. "You lied, you tried to get an innocent man hung. You ain't clear of this yet. Get that reward money and give it to Bill before I kill you deader'n hell! You got your cut for lying, so did that smith!"

Tosser gave the money to Bill Whitehall with the same eagerness he would have cut off his hand.

Gabe stuck out his hand to Bill and Bill took it. "Sorry, Whitehall. It was close there for awhile."

"Too close," Bill Whitehall said with a grin. "I'll be going, gents. This place makes me uneasy!"

They walked out to his horse with him and bade him good-by.

Bill Whitehall had nearly reached the first hills when he stopped to look back, and even as he looked a red glow grew back there at Suntown and soon flames were reaching high, leaping furiously. Took a big place to make a fire that size. A place about the size of Tosser's store.

Bill Whitehall felt of his neck, shuddered, and kicked his horse into a trot.

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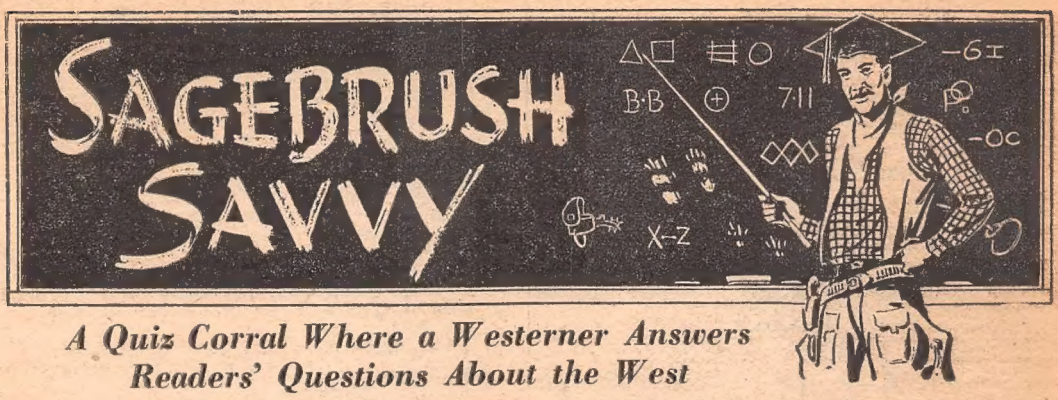


A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—At what season of the year do the Indians perform their rain dances, and does it seem to have any effect in bringing rain?—W.D.McG. (Ont., Can.)

A.—Most rain dances of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians of the arid Southwest occur in July or August, which weather bureau records show to be the normal season for thunderstorms in the region anyway, but the Indians steadfastly believe that their prayer-for-rain dances do make it rain, and I myself have seen a downpour follow a Cochití or Santo Domingo rain dance within a few hours, and even minutes. Rains at this season are not very general, and sometimes it just fails entirely to rain, as in 1956. I am not familiar with the rain dance customs of the Sioux, Blackfoot, Cheyenne and other more northern tribes.

Q.—What does the word "San" mean in the beginning of so many place names in California?—Mrs. G.J.J. (Ala.)

A.—"San," properly pronounced "Sahn," is masculine gender Spanish for "Saint." The feminine is "Santa." Thus San Leandro is St. Leander, Santa Rosa is St. Rose, etc. "Santo" and "Santa" also mean "Holy," as in Santa Fé—Holy Faith, and Santo Domingo—Holy Sunday.

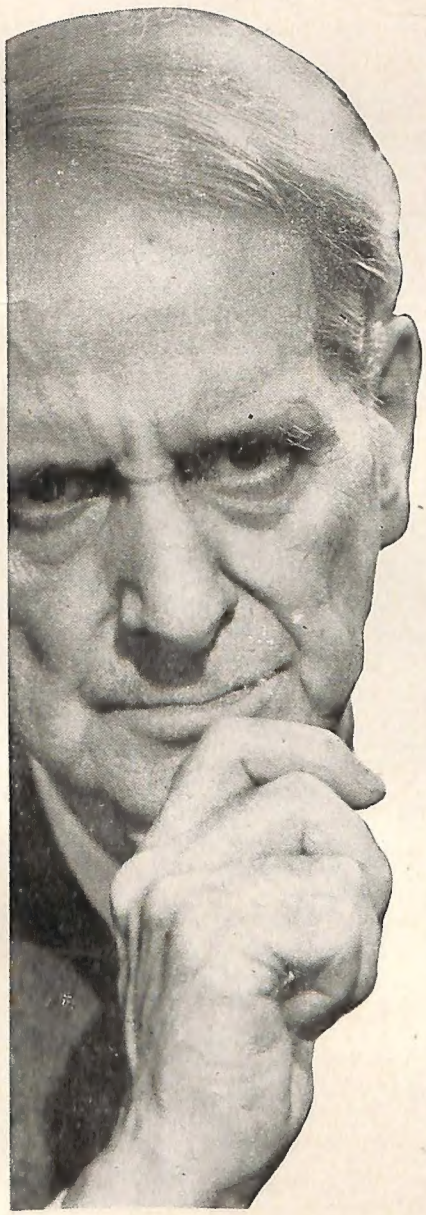
Q.—(1) Where in my home state of Texas is there a town where people are real Texans, Western, old-fashioned, where they have pie, cake-walks, church suppers, street dancing, with no tourists or Yankees? (2) What does the word "Tenido" mean in the novel title "Beyond the Tenido Barrier?" (3) In the West is there any wild, mountain land where a D.A.V. could buy a few acres cheap?—D.B. (Tenn.)

A.—(1) I'm afraid you can't get entirely away from modern progress, *amigo,* but you will find plenty of "real Texans" old-fashioned enough to have church suppers, box suppers, square dances, etc., in most any medium-to-small town in Texas, especially the western part. Same holds for New Mexico and the rest of the cow country. Tourists go everywhere these days, but not many stop in the small towns. Stamford and Dalhart, Texas, hold annual oldtime cowboys' reunions. So does Las Vegas, N. M., where much of the atmosphere of the Old West is renewed. (2) "Tenido," pronounced Tay-NEE-tho, is the past participle of the Spanish verb "tener" (tayn-AYR), which means "to have" or "to hold." Tenido Barrier would men "Held Barrier" or "Held-Back Barrier." (3) Wild mountain land is not easy to find at a cheap price in the West. A large part of such land is National Forest, and not many ranchers owning land in the mountains are willing to sell at any price. You can, however, lease cabin sites from the U.S. Forest Service. Address them in care of Dept. of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., or write Regional Forester, Albuquerque, N.M. for information.

In response to reader inquiries, Lester C. Sherrard, 409½ Locust Ave., Fairmont, W. Va., writes that he has back issues of TEXAS RANGERS, RIO KID and MASKED RIDER. Write him for any you want.

—S. Omar Barker

To The Man With
HERNIA
Who Can Not Submit to Surgery



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